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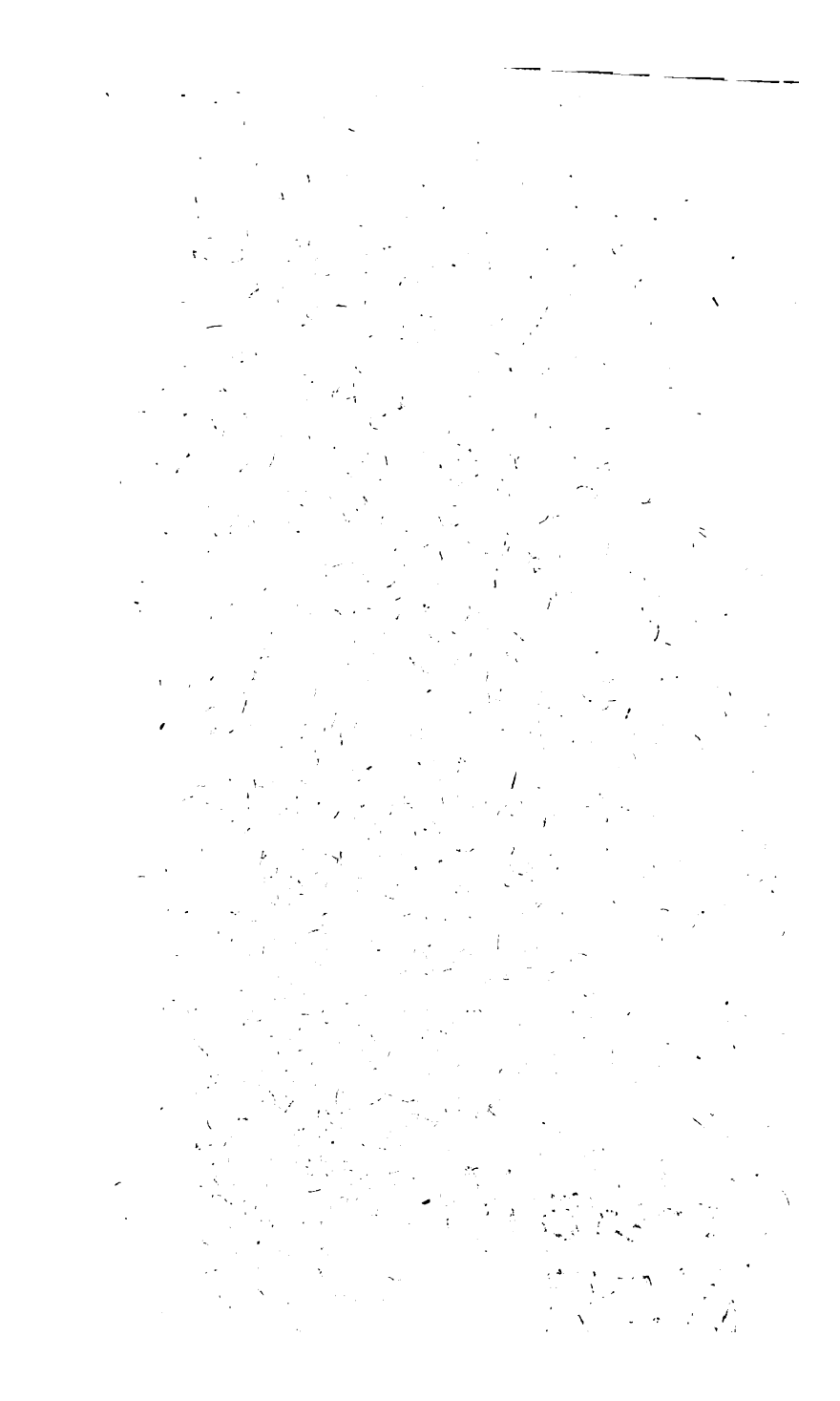
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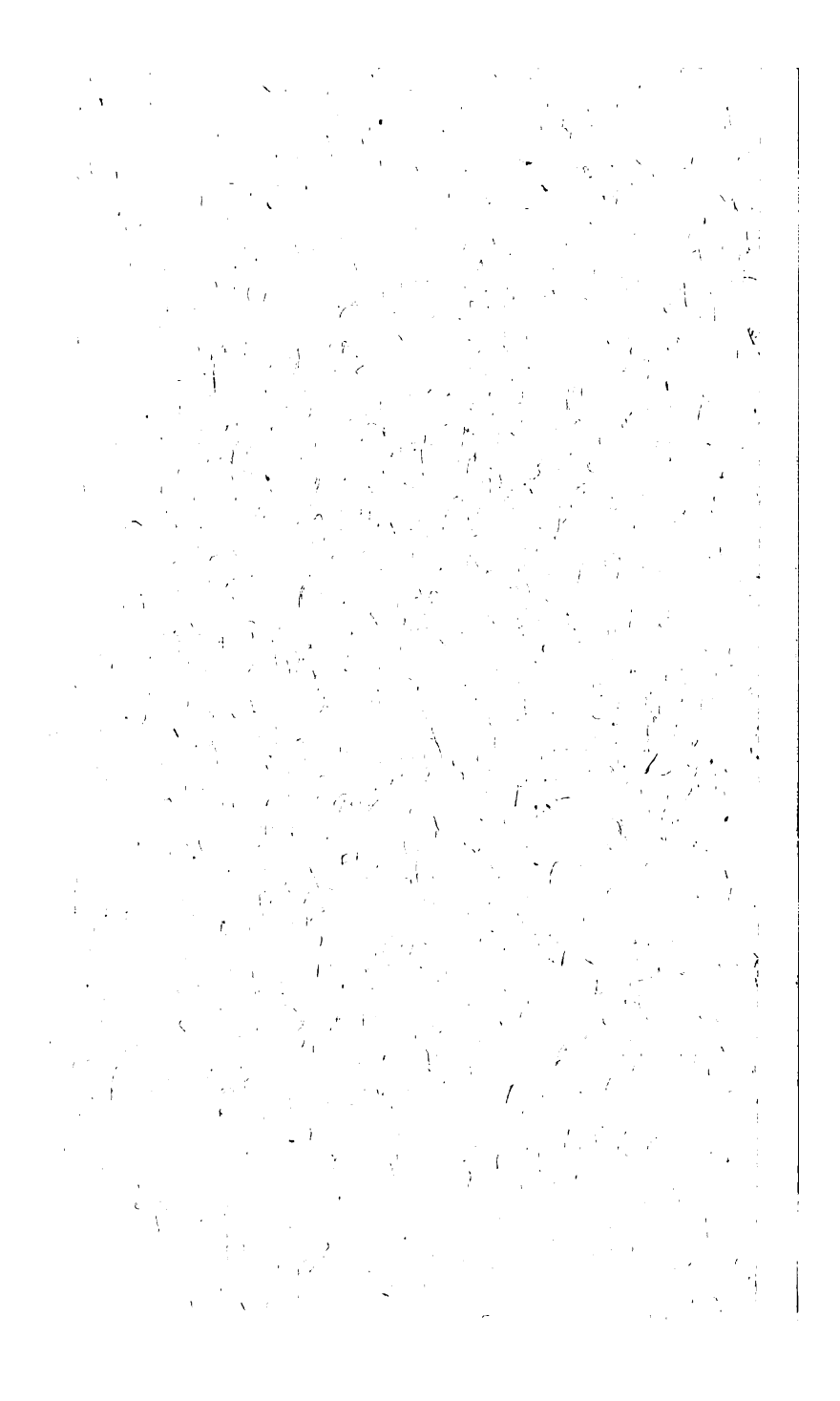
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VIOLET DOUGLAS;

OR,

THE PROBLEMS OF LIFE.

BY
(Martin)
EMMA MARSHALL,

AUTHOR OF "THE OLD GATEWAY," "MILLCENT LEGH,"
"HELEN'S DIARY," ETC.

"Curved is the line of Beauty,
Straight is the line of Duty:
Walk in the last, and thou shalt see
The other ever follow thee."



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VIOLET DOUGLAS.

CHAPTER I.

FATHER AND DAUGHTER.

“Despatch necessities : life hath a load
Which *must* be carried on—and safely may;
Yet keep these cares *without* thee, let the heart
Be God’s alone ; and choose the better part.

HENRY VAUGHAN.

It was three o’clock on a dingy November day, when the junior clerk in the Bank at Chelstone shut the outer doors of the office with a triumphant click, lighted the gas over the desks, and remarked to a young man who was lounging in a chair by the fire with a newspaper in his hand, that it was “a horrid bore,” there was an error in the ledger, and he did not believe they should “balance” till after midnight.

The young man thus appealed to, tilted his chair back on two legs and yawned, then he said, “An enviable prospect, certainly; where is old Evans?”

“In the partner’s room with Mr. Douglas, worse luck for me ; he will be saying it is my fault, of course.

Isn't it a nuisance that Tom Hawkins is finally laid up? He broke a blood-vessel, poor fellow, last night, and will never be seen behind this counter again."

"A precious good thing for him, I should think," was the rejoinder, as William Douglas took out his box of fusees, and prepared to light a cigar.

"For him and for you, too, perhaps, Dene. You'll take a step upwards on the ladder, I daresay, and find yourself at the top one day, in that very exalted position of head clerk in the ancient Bank of Douglas and Sanderson."

"I can't say how that may be," the youth answered; "but future prospects don't console me for present miseries. Poor Hawkins would find out this error in ten minutes, and old Evans and I shall be poking over it till the small hours, I expect. I suppose you could not lend a hand, sir?"

"I lend a hand, my dear fellow! My genius for banking is not developed yet, and I question if it ever will be; I should be more hindrance than help."

In another moment the door of the office had closed on Mr. William Douglas, while almost simultaneously the senior clerk and Mr. Douglas came in together from the room opening out of the Bank, familiarly called by the young clerks "the Den," and known by anxious clients as the awful private parlour of Mr. Douglas, where they were called upon sometimes to consider the unsatisfactory state of their accounts, or to be told, with courteous but yet with unflinching firmness, that no further advances could be made.

Mr. Douglas buttoned his coat tightly over his wide

chest, and taking his hat and stick, walked towards the door, saying as he passed the junior clerk :

“ Who has been smoking in the office ? ”

“ No one, sir ; that is, Mr. William Douglas only lighted his cigar a minute ago, and is just gone out of the Bank.” Mr. Douglas said no more : the information was evidently not welcome. He turned back, however, as he was closing the door, to say to Mr. Evans :

“ If you can think of any one who is suited to fill poor Hawkins’s place, you had better lose no time in making inquiry about him, and Mr. Sanderson and I will consider what his capabilities are likely to be.”

Mr. Douglas always referred to his partner, Mr. Sanderson, in this way ; but to all intents and purposes he, Mr. Douglas, ruled supreme. Mr. Sanderson was old and infirm, and, though from the force of long habit he drove to the Bank every morning for an hour or two, and sat in one of the large leather chairs in the private room to read the letters which Mr. Douglas laid before him, and to carp and cavil at most of the business arrangements, he was but a cypher in the flourishing concern to which he contributed a very large amount of capital, and in which his father before him, and a brother lately dead, had held the same position.

Mr. Douglas’s home was at the eastern extremity of the long straggling town of Chelstone. A row of pretty lime trees stood before it, and a gravel sweep led to the front door, which was formally placed in the middle of six windows, after the fashion of houses

of that date in many country towns in England. Though the front of Cranstone House was near the high road, and had the air of a town residence, the back looked out upon an extensive garden and shrubberies, and beyond these were fields and meadows, skirted by a line of hills which sheltered Chelstone from the north, and added greatly to the beauty of the neighbourhood.

Mr. Douglas walked homewards with a quick, firm step. The dull, murky light had nearly faded, and a cold, drizzling rain was beginning to fall. The blazing fire and bright gas-light, which shone through the windows of the Hall as he went up the drive to the house, looked inviting, and he was glad to put the latch-key into the door and find himself at home.

"Papa, is that you?" said a girl of seventeen, coming down the wide staircase into the hall as she heard her father's step. "Are you wet, papa?"

"No; it is only a fine, drizzling rain; but it is very cold. Where are the others, Violet?"

"Mamma is gone out in the carriage paying visits, and Constance and Lucy are with her. Lucy wanted to go, and I did not care about it; besides, I thought you might wish me to go with you to see Grannie."

The father's stately head was bent down to kiss the sweet face turned up to him. "It is too cold for you, darling, I am afraid; but I think I must look in on your Grandmamma, she was not very well on Sunday."

"Oh, please let me come too, papa!"

"Very well, then, wrap up, and put on your water-proof cloak."

She danced away, and her father was left standing under the gas-light in the hall, opening several notes and letters which had been addressed to his private residence. As he stands there, he is a fine picture of manhood, scarcely yet declined from its full vigour. Mr. Douglas was tall and well built, and his forehead was broad and white. His hair was sprinkled plentifully with gray; but the eyes, which looked out beneath the straight brows, had lost none of their fire. They flashed now, as he replaced one letter in its envelope and said, half to himself and half aloud,—

“Begging—nothing more nor less.”

“Who is begging, papa?” Violet asked, as she came down equipped for her walk. “What is it?”

“Oh! only the old story of distress, and some rigmarole about a son who wants a place somewhere, and is coming here for me to help him. A likely matter, poor woman! There are other boys than hers who want work, and some who won’t work when they have it, which is worse.”

“But, papa,” Violet said, as she put her hand into her father’s arm, and they went out together into the chilly evening air—“But, papa, why does this son’s mother write to you?”

“She says I knew the boy’s father, and I rather think I did. I was at Winchester with him, and he went to the University when I came to settle down in the Bank here. But if all my schoolfellows’ children thought they had a claim upon me, I should have rather more letters of this kind than I have already, Violet. Has Willie been at home to-day?”

as he left the room, and then said to Violet, "Your father is not looking well, Violet."

"Isn't he, Grannie? I think he is bothered and worried, but I hope he is not ill."

"Any fresh worries, darling?"

"Not fresh exactly; but I am afraid Willie has no intention of settling in the Bank, and of course it tries papa. There has been a coldness, too, between Willie and papa, since Charlie was at home for the Michaelmas holidays. You know, Grannie, how Willie took Charlie with him where he knew papa would not like him to be. Oh, dear! it is curious how people with everything they really can want, do persist in making themselves and others miserable."

"Yes," said Grannie, "a manufacture of troubles goes on in most houses where one would think the stream ought to run smoothly. I hope you three sisters try to make Willie's home a pleasant place to him."

"I should think we did," said Violet; "and you know, dear Grannie, how it is with mamma. She can't see Willie crossed in anything, and I believe it is this sort of setting him up at home that makes a great deal of the mischief. Constance is very fond of Willie, and Lucy humours him in everything. But I must say I dislike to see him so intolerably selfish, and, above all, to see papa's face constantly clouded by what he says and does."

When Mr. Douglas returned to the little drawing-room, the subject was changed immediately, and the representatives of three generations spent a happy

hour together. There was a harmony between them which was very pleasant to notice ; for the grave, and as some said the harsh, Mr. Douglas was never so genial, nor so much at ease, as when with his mother.

And Violet was a link between them scarcely less dear to her grandmother than to her father : a simple-hearted, loving girl who was cast into the shade sometimes by her two elder sisters, but had that most excellent gift in woman—the power of turning her brightest side homeward. Violet was only just seventeen, and was but lately emancipated from the jurisdiction of a governess. But in spite of her youth and her retiring nature, it was to Violet that Charlie brought his school troubles ; to Violet that her mother turned when weary and tired ; to Violet that Constance and Lucy came when they wanted advice about a new dress, or help to re-model an old one ; while to her father she was, what it is not given to every daughter to be—a friend as well as a child, a companion and comforter in the little roughnesses of daily life.

“We must go into this matter, Mr. Dene,” was old Mr. Evans’s remark as Mr. Douglas left the Bank that afternoon. “We must go through the ledger and day-book, and call off the bills from beginning to end. It is no use trifling with a thing like this : a deficiency of 17*l.* 18*s.* and 6*d.* *must* be accounted for. Now, Mr. Dene !”

The two heads were bent over the great heavy

books, and a rigorous scrutiny was begun when the bell at the Bank-door sounded.

"That is the second time, ring away!" was Mr. Dene's remark. But he did not get off his high stool. "Twenty minutes past three is a little too late to attend to you, sir, whoever you may be. That's right, ring again!"

"Mr. Dene, why don't you open the door?" said the cashier, pushing up his spectacles from his perplexed forehead.

"Really, sir, these farmers must not be encouraged to bother us after the proper hour."

"Open the door, Mr. Dene," was the somewhat peremptory order, and the young clerk was constrained to obey.

"Can I see Mr. Douglas?" was the question put in a pleasant frank voice, as the door was at last opened by Mr. Dene.

"Certainly not!" was the reply. "Mr. Douglas is not here."

"This is Douglas and Sanderson's Bank, is it not?" was the question.

"Yes!" and the door was pushed closer, as if to intimate that the conversation was not to be prolonged.

The gesture was not a civil one, and the tone of the questioner was altered when he spoke again. There was a touch of pride, almost of authority, in his voice as he said :

"I will thank you to tell me where I can find Mr. Douglas. I have a letter for him."

"Mr. Douglas is to be seen here between eleven and three o'clock on most days. His private residence is Cranstone House, on the Hurstminster Road ; but I should think your business with him would be better talked over here."

"I am the best judge of that," was the answer. "In which direction does Cranstone House lie?"

"Mr. Dene!" the old cashier called, in an exasperated voice ; "Mr. Dene, what are you parleying about there ? ask the person to step in !" But the person had turned away as the young clerk answered his last interrogatory : "Take the first turn to the left, and the street will lead you on into the Hurstminster Road."

"Who was it ?" asked Mr. Evans, sharply.

"That's more than I know. A seedy fellow, covered with mud, who wanted Mr. Douglas. Some begging story, I dare say."

"What did you stand wasting words so long for, then ? Now, call over. I think I have got a light upon this matter, at last. Look sharp, Dene, will you ?" For Mr. Dene was raising himself on tip-toe to peep over the high wire blinds on which "Bank" was painted in large letters, to watch the "seedy fellow" as he walked with rapid strides down High Street, and took the turn to the left. An uncomfortable suspicion lurked in the junior clerk's mind that the "seedy fellow covered with mud" might not be a beggar after all, and that he had the tone and bearing of a gentleman, in spite of his rough overcoat and splashed boots. "I don't envy

him his reception at Cranstone House, though, if he is going to broach business or begging there," was Mr. Dene's final conclusion, as he went back to the desk, and turned the leaves of the heavy ledger once more.

An hour later and Mrs. Douglas and her two daughters, Constance and Lucy, were seated by the bright fire at the end of the long drawing-room of Cranstone House. They had just come in from their drive, and the girls' hats were lying on one of the many comfortable chairs, which were grouped around this habitable part of a room, which was separated from the larger and longer division by a heavy red curtain. Constance and Lucy Douglas were sipping their cups of five o'clock tea with the easy abandon of the present race of young ladies, who, setting the stiff habits of our grandmothers at defiance, lounge full length in low cushioned chairs, or even take up their stations on the hearth rug—a footstool being the excuse for a seat. Mrs. Douglas had made herself comfortable, also, and leaned back with her bonnet untied, and her rich velvet mantle with its grebe trimming unfastened.

"Has any one called to-day, Constance," she asked. "Did you notice if there were any cards?"

"Not one," said Constance; "it is such a horrid day. Every one is best at home."

"Well, we have got over those distant visits, which is a comfort," was Mrs. Douglas's rejoinder. "Hurst Hill is really a very pretty house now. How pleased Mrs. Hastings is with all the alterations and improvements!"

"Yes, indeed," said Lucy, "and how pleased with her grandson. Never was the old saying that we think our own geese swans more perfectly illustrated than in the case of Mrs. Hastings' adoration for Freddie, Frederick, or Fred. Now, Constance, confess the young squire is of the most commonplace genus."

"Indeed," said Constance, in a slow, indifferent tone, "indeed, Lucy, I am quite ready to agree with you; but other grandmothers besides Mrs. Hastings are wont to make heroes of their grandsons, or rather heroines of their granddaughters. I think the Hurst Hill people are very much like the rest of the world."

"Well, if we were all to be set in the key of F flat, like them, I must say that the world would be duller than it is. But I have not quite settled with Mary about my get-up for the evening. You remember we are going to the Sandersons *en masse*, mamma."

"Yes, dear Lucy," said Mrs. Douglas; "and I hope you will try not to keep the wagonette waiting. Your father does dislike it so much."

"Yes, I know; or rather I know that sulky old Curtis likes to wait for no man," said Lucy, picking up her hat, and dancing through the red curtain into the darkness of the large drawing-room, and as she did so nearly stumbling over the grave man-servant who was advancing towards the nucleus of light with a card and a letter on a salver, followed by a figure scarcely distinguishable in the gloom behind.

"Mr. Ambrose Hampden," said Ellis, in his quiet deliberate tones, and the figure the junior clerk at the

Bank had eyed so scornfully, now came out into the light of the fire and of two wax candles, which were burning on the chimney-piece.

"Mr. Douglas is not at home, Ellis," Mrs. Douglas began, glancing at the address of the letter as she took it with the card from the salver. Then she added, half-rising to acknowledge the youth's bow, "Perhaps my husband will be here soon ; will you not sit down, Mr. Hampden ?"

"I am very sorry to intrude upon you. I am afraid it is rather late to do so ; but I was anxious to bring Sir John Terry's letter this evening, and to follow my mother's addressed to Mr. Douglas as soon as possible."

Mrs. Douglas was perplexed ; but the accent and bearing of the speaker were gentleman-like, and she was too discriminating to measure him by his rough unfashionable overcoat as Mr. Dene had done. So she said, "Are you coming to live in Chelstone : it is a very healthy place, and there is some pleasant society here ?"

"I am coming to live here, if Mr. Douglas can kindly give me employment. I am looking out for some work whereby I may help my mother and sisters."

"Oh !" said Mrs. Douglas, in a tone which seemed to imply that the statement made some difference ; "Mr. Douglas generally sees people on business at the Bank ; but pray wait till he returns," for Ambrose had risen, and was debating whether after all he had not better postpone his application till the next morning. But just as he was preparing to retreat into

the gloom again, and bid Mrs. Douglas good afternoon, Mr. Douglas and Violet came in.

"I thought you would be home before us, mamma. Papa and I have been to see Grannie. Do look what I have picked up on the road—this poor, dejected miserable little dog. I think one of his legs is broken, and——"

She stopped short on hearing her mother say, "This gentleman is waiting to see you, Kenneth;" and became for the first time aware of Ambrose's presence. "Here is a letter," Mrs. Douglas continued, handing her husband the envelope and the card together.

Mr. Douglas looked at Ambrose with a keen, searching glance, then he cast his eye over the letter, and finally said, in a voice which had not much encouragement in it, to the brave young heart beating under the rough overcoat, "Mr. Hampden, will you kindly come with me to my study? We will there, if you please, discuss the subject of Sir John Terry's letter."

Ambrose bowed, and was following Mr. Douglas from the room, when he set his foot upon the toe or tail of the luckless little dog which Violet had deposited on the hearthrug, while she went to a table where the tea-things still stood, to get her *protégé* some milk and water. The dog set up something between a yell and a squeal, and Violet turned quickly round.

"I beg your pardon!" said Ambrose. "I hope I have not hurt the poor little creature. I am very sorry!"

"Oh, never mind!" she answered. "You could not help it. I dare say it was the poor broken leg."

"My dear child," said Mrs. Douglas, "that little cur is only fit for the duck-pond. You had better let Curtis have it, and put an end to its sufferings."

"Such a horrid little wretch!" said Constance. "No one but you, Violet, would have brought it home!"

"Oh, Constance, I could not let it lie in the road to be run over; and just see how gratefully it looks at me with its brown eyes. It has no friend but me."

Those were the last words Ambrose Hampden heard as he left the room with Mr. Douglas.

"How stupid of Ellis to show that poor youth in upon us," said Mrs. Douglas. "It was excessively awkward for him and for us, too."

"Yes," said Constance; "poor mamma began to descant on the climate of Chelstone and the society, while the poor man, it seems, is in great need of work or money, which he hopes to get out of papa."

"His mother wrote to papa about him," Violet said. "The letter came by the afternoon post. At least, I am almost sure he must be the same person. Papa said it was a begging letter from a mother about her son, whose father was a schoolfellow of papa's."

"He has a gentlemanlike voice, and was not bad looking, as far as I could see," said Mrs. Douglas. "Ah, Willie, is that you?" and she bore patiently what she would have borne from no other dog in the

world—the paws of her son's great retriever on the ample folds of her black silk gown.

Willie Douglas turned his back to the fire, and leaned against the chimney piece exclaiming,—

“What on earth have you got there, Violet?”

“Oh, Willie! please call Brownie off! he will frighten my dog out of his senses.”

“Your dog!” repeated her brother, scornfully. “Your dog! what a horrid little mangy cur! It is only fit to hang by the neck! It is too ugly to live.” — — — — —

Violet stood with the little creature in her arms, held safe above Brownie's attempts to snuff at him, and evaded all his efforts to take summary vengeance on the intruder.

“His leg is broken,” she said, “and I am going to ask Patty to bind it up. I may try to get it well before I turn the dog adrift? May I not, mamma?”

“Really, Violet, I cannot have another dog about the house. It is quite enough to have old Dandy and Willie's Brownie, besides the dogs in the stable-yard.”

“I will keep my poor little Trove in the school-room till his leg is well; and then I will find him a home, mamma; I could not desert him now.”

“Very well, my dear; but remember we must be ready at half-past six. It is time for us all to go and dress. You have not forgotten this is the night when we dine at Mr. Sanderson's, Willie?”

“I am not going to dine there, mother, thank you; I would rather be excused.”

"But, my dear boy, you surely will come? Do not offend Mr. Sanderson and vex your father! Pray come, darling!"

"I can't, mother. I am engaged to dine elsewhere."

Mrs. Douglas's face fell; and Violet laid her hand on her brother's arm,—

"Willie, dear, I think you ought to go; it is so easy to please papa in a little thing like that."

"I don't call it a little thing to eat one of those awfully heavy dinners at Redland Lodge; they are too much for my digestion. And I can't praise the old port, and say the nutty sherry is perfection more than once a year. Nor can I stand old Sanderson's humbug. I wonder my father can put up with it, either." Then, seeing his mother's grieved face, he added, "It is a shame to victimize you and mamma, too, I think." Then he kissed his mother's cheek, pulled Violet's ear, put his hands in his pockets, whistled to Brownie, and went out of the room.

Mrs. Douglas gathered up her mantle, which had fallen from her shoulders, and with a heavy sigh followed her son, and the two sisters were left together.

"Well, Constance, we must go now, I suppose. Constance!" for her sister sat looking into the fire, neither moving nor speaking, "are you not sorry about Willie?"

"I don't wonder at his wanting to get out of this dinner at Redland Lodge. Still, it is a pity he runs counter to papa in everything. Are you going to wear a high dress to-night, Violet?"

10t "Oh, yes! I am not really come forth out of my
ay shell, you know."

1e- "You will do that at the Hurst Hill festivities.
d The cards will be sent out in a few days. There is
o to be a dinner to the poor, and a ball and supper to
e the tenants and tradesmen as well as to the other
people. It will be a capital opportunity for you to
appear, Violet."

"We shall see about it," was the reply. "Now I
must look after poor Trove. How composedly he has
gone to sleep in my arms! And then, Constance, I
will try your hair in the new roll that Mary could not
manage the other night. But we must make haste ;
Lucy is ready by this time, I daresay."

CHAPTER II.

THE DECISION IS MADE.

“Our doubts are traitors,
And make us lose the good we oft might win
By fearing to attempt.”—SHAKESPEARE.

As Ambrose Hampden walked down the road towards Chelstone again, he began to feel conscious that he was very tired and very hungry. He had left his travelling-bag at the station ; and had made his way straight to the Bank, and thence on to Cranstone House, without pausing for rest or refreshment.

He had to go through the whole length of Chelstone to reach the railway station ; and as he walked along the quiet streets, the fine drizzling rain, driven in his face by a cold east wind which was beginning to blow fiercely, did not tend to cheer him or raise his spirits.

A great longing seized Ambrose to take a third-class ticket for the second time that day, and go back to the large manufacturing town where he had left his mother and young sisters that morning in a poor close lodging in a back street ; then the remembrance of how many hopes were centred on this

introduction of Sir John Terry's to the influential banker at Chelstone, and how unsuccessful had been many applications he had made for situations on his own responsibility, determined him to wait for the promised interview with Mr. Douglas at the Bank the next day, before he gave up the idea of settling as a clerk in a dull country town with a salary of £50 a year !

Having recovered his bag from the civil porter who had promised to take care of it for him, Ambrose turned out into the wet road again, and retraced his steps once more to a red-brick house with a large gilt star over the portico, which he had noticed in a street not far from the station, and where he thought he would put up for the night.

As he crossed the street to the door of the inn, a wagonette with a pair of high-stepping bay horses came swiftly round the corner; and Ambrose felt the pole of the carriage unpleasantly near his shoulder, while the horses were drawn up on their haunches, and the coachman shouted out, "Take care there !"

The pause was but momentary; but as Ambrose looked up, the gaslight was sufficient to reveal a face at the window nearest to him. He knew it at once to be that of the young lady who had come into Mr. Douglas's drawing-room with the dog in her arms.

He watched the carriage till it disappeared; and, had the traffic of Chelstone been great, he would certainly have stood a good chance of being knocked down in earnest; but carriages in Chelstone, by day or by night, were few and far between, and the business

of the people was not pressing enough to bring them out after dark.

"That girl is like Mabel," he said to himself; "very like her; perhaps not so pretty; but what a puzzle life is! Why should she be driving off to some grand party with flowers in her hair, and my poor May sitting in that little shabby room working herself to death?—why?"

Similar questions have arisen in most minds as life's problems come before us sometimes, and seem sternly to demand a solution.

But we must be patient. Wide as the gulf often seems which is set between two lives—the gifts and pleasures and advantages of the one so manifold, the privations and the disappointments and actual labour of the other so many—there is a reason and a needs be; and when our vision is cleared from the mists and vapours of this earthly atmosphere, we shall learn, in the bright shining of the heavenly kingdom, what it is to see face to face—to know as we are known. Nevertheless, for the young impetuous heart panting for the bright and pleasant things of the world, longing to enter into them as only youth can long, it is hard discipline to feel the pressure of poverty, and to find the absolute want of money, in its literal sense, the bar thrown across the road, whichever way it would seem to lead.

As Ambrose turned into the public room at the "Star," and ordered of the shabby old waiter a dinner of cold meat, and bread and cheese, his listless weary air, and his pale tired face, seemed to awake

even this man to sympathy: he stirred the dull fire, and made it send up a feeble blaze, drew one of the tables near, and invited Ambrose to sit there instead of at the further end of the room by the door, where he had at first sunk upon one of the hard uncompromising chairs.

"We have some soup, sir—hot soup. It's a very cold evening, sir. Shall I bring you some, as first course, and a glass of grog, sir?" Ambrose felt the kindly regard for his comfort, and accepted the first offer, though he refused the second. The room smelt of all the dinners eaten there by all the Chelstone farmers on market-days for the last year, and of all the pipes they had smoked afterwards as well! A desolate bare room it was; but when Ambrose had eaten his dinner, and the fire blazed more brightly under the old waiter's repeated attentions, he felt cheerful again, and, taking a black writing-case from his bag, began a letter to his mother.

"The post does not go out till seven?"

"No, sir. The office isn't a hundred yards off. It now wants twenty-two minutes, sir; and an extra stamp will get a letter in, sir, till half-past. So there is no particular hurry, sir," the waiter said, brushing away the crumbs with his hand from the table into a plate, and noticing how few fragments were left.

"He is but a young traveller," the man soliloquised. "But young; and the world doesn't go very smooth with him, I fancy: but he is a gentleman, any one with half an eye can see that, let alone a man like me, who was once footman in a high family. I know

the gentry when I see them, though them that apes their ways fancy I don't."

Ambrose's letter was short, and had he not known how anxiously it would be expected the next morning he would not have written it at all; for Mr. Douglas had made him no distinct promise, and Sir John Terry's introduction had failed to impress him as much as Mrs. Hampden had expected; while the fact that his father had known Mr. Douglas in early days was not even referred to in the interview Ambrose had had with him in the comfortable study, with its well-stored bookshelves, its luxurious chairs and capacious writing table, with its countless drawers and conveniences for correspondence.

This story of Ambrose Hampden's father is an old one, and continually repeated; a story in which the salient points are the same, though the details may vary with different individuals. It was the story of a hard-working over-taxed clergyman, the son of a gentleman of very small means, who had given his boy an education at Winchester, and seen him pass from thence to Oxford as an exhibitioner with pride and joy.

Then, when the university life was over—the close of which the father never lived to see—came the accustomed routine of Holy orders—a curacy—a wife—many children and a slender income—failing health and broken spirits—and at last death from an infectious disorder which had sent two out of his seven children to lie down in their graves already, leaving Ambrose at twenty the sole hope and stay of his mother

and three young sisters, two of whom were yet children, and a baby brother of scarcely more than three years old. Mr. Hampden had lived a retired life in the perpetual curacy of a country district. He was not a man to make friends in the common acceptation of the word, and was not gifted with worldly wisdom. He and his wife had few relations, and no influential connexions. The boy Ambrose had been his father's hope and pride, and having carried everything before him at the Grammar School within twenty miles of his home, he had been persuaded by the head-master and his father to go up and try his fortune for one of the open scholarships at Oxford. Everyone was sure he would succeed ; but "Everyone" was wrong. Ambrose failed, and came back disappointed, and yet determined to begin all over again, and to try till he gained his point. So he set himself to read afresh, and worked under his father's eye, who encouraged him to do his best, and kept him up to the mark by assurances that in a second trial all would be well.

Whether Mr. Hampden was wise in this I cannot say ; whether, considering what slender resources he had to count upon for his other children, and how much too poor he was to let Ambrose be dependent on him till he was past the age when the sons of poor parents are mostly doing their part as bread-winners for themselves, at least, if not for others ; whether he was even justified in allowing his eldest boy to work for an uncertain issue, I will not decide. But the second attempt to gain the much-desired scholarship was also unsuccessful, and *proxime accessit* in the list

was but a poor consolation to the young eager heart, whose visions of university life were thus once more dispelled. It was a heavy blow to his father ; he who had been successful himself years before, when scholarships were so much less numerous than now, could scarcely bring himself to believe that his boy, whom he had "coached himself," too, should actually fail. But dark days full of other anxieties came quickly upon this disappointment. A low, infectious fever hung about Mr. Hampden's parish all that winter and spring, and he had to give his thoughts and time to visits among the sick and dying. That Ambrose should get some situation as a tutor was now his desire ; but Ambrose was not very anxious to bestir himself, and still sat absorbed in his books in his father's study of a morning, and spent the afternoons in walking with his eldest sister and great friend, and liking to hear her wonder how it was that *he*, of all people, could miss the scholarship : he was so like papa, and so clever ! From this desultory life Ambrose was to know a rough awakening. The fever, which lay dormant in the early summer, blazed out again under the fierce heat of a marvellously tropical September, and two children of the curate of Salsbury were amongst its earliest victims.

Then came the heaviest calamity of all : the father was smitten by the fever, and speedily sank under it, and was followed to his grave by many affectionate parishioners, who could recall with grateful hearts the words of comfort he had ministered to them in their hours of sorrow. The sight of his mother's grief, and

the helpless condition in which she and his young sisters were left, made a man of Ambrose.

Dreams of college life and future success were finally dispelled ; and to work for his mother, and help her to make her scanty means sufficient for the support of his sisters and the little brother still called, *par excellence*, 'baby,' was his grand aim. But he would ask for no help in this, and scarcely liked his mother to accept the purse with a hundred guineas in it which was given to her by the good people of Salisbury as a testimonial of respect to her husband's memory. Neither was his acknowledgement as graceful as it might have been ; and when the vicarage of Salisbury was cleared, and Mrs. Hampden and her children went to a cheap lodging in a large manufacturing town not far distant, that Ambrose might find something to do there, the Salisbury folk said to themselves and to each other that Ambrose's pride would have a fall.

Sir John Terry, the great man of the neighbourhood, had even then offered an introduction to Mr. Douglas ; and Mrs. Hampden, finding out that Mr. Douglas was the man of whom she had often heard her husband speak, was urgent that Ambrose should go at once to Chelstone and try his fortune there. But it was not till after many weeks had gone by, and disappointment followed disappointment, and rebuffs and snubs from great cotton lords and calico princes and fine sugar dealers had taught poor Ambrose a bitter lesson, that he consented to apply to Sir John Terry for the slighted introduction, and had allowed

his mother to write to Mr. Douglas and remind him of his early friendship with her husband. A clerkship in a small country town seemed to Ambrose, however, far less inviting than life in a city where the great human tide of hopes and fears is ever restlessly surging to and fro.

As he strolled listlessly through the streets of Chelstone this wet evening, after having posted his letter, just as the clock of St. Andrew's Abbey church struck seven, he was impressed with the stillness of everything about him—so different to the busy populous place he had left by the early mail train two hours before daylight that very morning. He wondered how a fortune could be made by a banker out of this little town of the West country; for Ambrose did not know that it was surrounded by an agricultural population, and by a good sprinkling of country gentry also, to whom it was as a little metropolis even now, and once had still more of that character in the days that were past, before the "resonant steam eagles" had found their way even to Chelstone, and had startled its inhabitants into the certainty that there were other means of locomotion, than the stage coach for the commoner folk, and the post-chaise for the gentry.

Ambrose was taking a survey of the length and breadth of Chelstone as soon as it was light the next morning, and if the weather is to be taken as typical of his future, it certainly favoured him.

The clouds had all cleared away, and a bright winter sun was shining on the gables of the quaint old houses,

and illuminating the east end of the grand Abbey church of St. Andrew, as it stood out in strong relief against the clear blue sky.

This church was the main feature of Chelstone ; it presided over the town with its noble towers ; and there was no point whence it was not visible nearer or farther from the eye, and dwarfing into comparative insignificance the old church of St. Catherine at the extreme right of the tower, and the new district church of St. John's at the extreme west. Ambrose Hampden had time to make out all the principal features of Chelstone before the bells chimed for morning prayer in the Abbey church ; and had paced not only through every street, but had explored the outskirts, and had walked a long way up the road past Cranstone House to a little wooded hill, from which he could see Chelstone stretched before him. The distant hills, the valley dotted with villages and church towers, were all bathed in the lustre of such a morning as November sometimes brings to us, touching every leaf still hanging on the trees with glory, and showing us that, even in the proverbially dreariest month of the year, there are yet bright days, as in the saddest life some pleasant places. Ambrose was determined to be punctual to the time appointed for his interview with Mr. Douglas ; but equally so not to be before it, that he might not have to wait the pleasure of the head in the presence of his officials. It was just eleven when at last he walked into the Bank with a quick firm tread, and stepping up to the wide counter, repeated his question of the day before : " Can I see Mr.

Douglas?" As he spoke, Mr. Evans's head, with its crop of short upright gray hair, appeared from behind his desk, and taking the answer upon himself, before Mr. Dene could reply, he said, "Yes, will you come in here? Mr. Hampden, I suppose." Ambrose bowed, and followed Mr. Evans to the private room where Mr. Douglas and a pale sallow-faced old gentleman were sitting, one on either side of a hard business-like table covered with black leather.

This was a very different room to the study at Cranstone House. The dingy walls were ornamented only by two full-sized portraits of old partners in the Bank, with here and there a swinging book shelf, on which were bound volumes of Bankers' Magazines, Money Market Reviews, and Bullionists; while all the current literature of the week which related to the same subject lay on the table flanking the huge inkstand, with three quills lying across it for the use of the partners who never wrote with that modern invention—a steel pen.

Mr. Douglas looked up from the letter he was reading when Ambrose entered, and rising turned his back to the fire, saying to the old gentleman who was still lounging in his arm-chair,—

"This is the young man I mentioned to you, Mr. Sanderson."

"Ah! very good; recommended by Sir John Terry, I think you said. Well, Mr. Douglas, I suppose you are satisfied as to the respectability of a person when Sir John Terry answers for it. But it is necessary to be careful, Mr. Douglas—to exercise due caution

in these days. Especially—— Is the door shut, Mr. Evans? There is a very decided draught cutting round my neck. May I trouble you to ascertain, Mr. Evans?"

The elderly clerk assured himself and his superior, that the door was shut, by pressing his back against it; and then, taking his pen from behind his ear and replacing it, said,—

"You know, sir, I presume, that Mr. Hawkins is in a state that precludes the hope of recovery."

"Yes, yes, poor fellow! I have had a delicate chest and consumptive symptoms all my life; so I can sympathize with others. We must see that Hawkins has wine, Mr. Douglas, if it is ordered for him."

"Certainly," was the reply. "But I think we must attend to this matter now, Mr. Sanderson. Mr. Hampden, you have had no experience in book-keeping?"

"No," said Ambrose, who stood with outward composure waiting for the decision which was to affect his future life, though inwardly chafing at the cool indifference with which he was discussed. "No, I have had no training which would fit me for a banker's clerk; but I think I could surmount any difficulty with patience, and I would—I would do my best."

"We have just now rather a short staff in the Bank," said Mr. Douglas, "and it is rather important that we should have an efficient person in Mr. Hawkins's place."

"I think, sir," interposed Mr. Evans, "that young Dene can step into that place very well, and then, if

Mr. William Douglas gives some assistance—keeps the day-book, for instance——”

“Ah, by-the-bye!” interrupted Mr. Sanderson, “I forgot William. Is there an absolute necessity for a fourth clerk?”

“Decidedly on market days; they are too much pressed as it is,” Mr. Douglas said sharply; and Mr. Sanderson withdrew his objection.

“Will you oblige us by giving us a specimen of your handwriting, Mr. Hampden?” were Mr. Douglas’s next words, as he pushed a sheet of paper towards Ambrose, and gave him one of the quill pens.

Quick as thought flashed through Ambrose’s mind the examination papers on which so much had depended when he last had tried his powers for a given end; the doubts about himself which, in spite of the prophecy of others, had lurked in his mind; the feeling which grew to be certainty that, however well-primed with the Latin and Greek of a country grammar school, he was not up to the required mark of these days; and, then, the uplifted hope at the second trial, and the final disappointment when, after all, it might be that his doubts were the traitors, and made him lose the good he might have won. Now these very thoughts moved him to write on the square sheet of Bath-post,—

“Our doubts are traitors,
And make us lose the good we oft might win
By fearing to attempt.”

Mr. Evans looked over his shoulder, and nodding

his head as the fair clear characters flowed from the pen, said,—

“Very good ! now a few figures.”

And Ambrose made a line of figures under the quotation, saying to himself, “They will think me a prig ; I ought only to have signed my name and written Chelstone beneath it.”

But the Shakespeare quotation was lost on Mr. Evans and on Mr. Sanderson, who languidly glanced at the paper and said, “A very legible hand, I think.”

Mr. Douglas laid it on the table without a word, but he looked with a keen searching glance at Ambrose. The clear honest eyes, shadowed by masses of tangled brown hair, met his without flinching ; and the delicate nostril and curved lips were indicative of a proud independent spirit.

Mr. Douglas read the young man’s face as easily as he had done the piece of specimen caligraphy, and some sort of appreciation and even respect began to awake in him towards the son of one whom he had known in early years. At last he spoke,—

“I think, Mr. Sanderson, we had better avail ourselves of Mr. Hampden’s services.” Then, addressing Ambrose, he said, “You know, perhaps, Mr. Hampden, that Sir John Terry offers to stand as your security for the sum we always require when gentlemen enter our office. He is a friend of yours, I imagine?”

“No, indeed ; I have seen him but a few times ; but he attended my father’s church when he was at Salisbury Park, and, I believe, had a great regard for him in his public capacity, as many had. I am deeply

indebted to Sir John for this proof of his respect to my father's memory. I do not think I shall prove unworthy of it."

"I will write to Sir John Terry this evening, and to your mother, Mr. Hampden. I also knew your father, and I am glad to be able to serve his son. Mr. Evans, Mr. Sanderson and I decide to give Mr. Hampden the junior clerkship in this office, and allow Mr. Dene to take the accountant's place. When can you enter upon your duties, Mr. Hampden? Immediately, I hope?"

"I think, sir, it will be necessary for me to return to Porchester, where my mother and sisters are now living. I should like to bring them here,—indeed, I *must* bring them here,—they have no one to depend upon but me. I must, however, first find a small house or lodging in Chelstone, so that I can come to the Bank at once, if you will give me leave to fetch my mother and sisters when I have a home ready for them."

A home! So they were depending on that slenderly made boy to make them a home!

"I beg your pardon, sir," said Mr. Evans; "but you did not mention at what salary I was to enter Mr. Hampden's name."

"We will say sixty pounds for the first year, Mr. Evans."

And then Mr. Douglas bowed, and Mr. Sanderson said, "Good morning;" and Ambrose heard him grumbling because the leaves of the *Bullionist* were badly cut, as he left the room followed by Mr. Evans.

"He said fifty pounds a year last night," Ambrose thought. "He was a great deal more gracious to-day. Perhaps, after all, that young clerk was right, and bank business is best discussed at the Bank ; but it is a comfort that I have a gentleman to deal with. In spite of his stiff official manner, how different he is to those great cotton dons, or even the Porchester banker I tried on my own account. It will be hard work, however, to get on, and sixty pounds a year seems very little to add to the general fund ; still, it is something ; and Mabel will like Chelstone, I am sure ;—better than I shall, for it seems a sleepy mediæval old place with that great church overshadowing it."

CHAPTER III.

MABEL.

"She was much like the moon
Seen in the daytime ; that by day receives
Like joy with us ; but when our night is dark,
Lit by the changeless sun we cannot see,
Shineth no less."—ANON.

"MABEL, my dear, put away your work ; *pray* do ! Ambrose will be coming in from the Bank directly, and you had better take advantage of the twilight for a walk."

"I wish you would go to-day, mother, instead," was the reply, "and take Rosie and Katie, too. I must send this work home on the twenty-second, you know I promised to do so ; besides, it will brighten Christmas a little, if I get paid for it."

"Yes, if you get paid, my dear ! The last skirts you embroidered are not paid for yet ; have you forgotten that ?"

"No, mother ; but the lady-superintendent said, you know, that she hoped to send me the money before Christmas ; so it had better all come together. It is not her fault that I have not been paid."

"No; the grand ladies who order all these fine things from the institution, and then take no notice of the bills, are the people to blame. It is a strange idea of charity. Oh! Mabel, it makes my heart ache to see you stitching away for bread, you who are fitted for better things. I can't help saying so, Mabel." And Mrs. Hampden's voice sank into the fretful tone of sorrowful complaint which had become habitual to her of late, and was one of the trials of Mabel's lot; for anxiety and affliction and poverty had not raised poor Mrs. Hampden towards heaven, but had rather crushed and depressed her, and held her to earth with a three-fold cord. Nor is this so uncommon as is often supposed.

It is hard, very hard, to learn cheerfully to follow His steps in the rugged paths of privation and carking care and daily anxieties,—hard, very hard, to look upward, instead of earthward, and soar above trials and discomforts and pinching want on the wings of faith.

It might be that naturally Mrs. Hampden's disposition was not buoyant, and that in any position she would still have found room for complaint and grumbling; but if there *can* be an excuse for murmurs, surely it may be pleaded on behalf of those who are bending under the weight of well-bred poverty,—who know the positive want of pounds, shillings, and pence, to supply the common necessities of life.

"Mother, don't mind about me. I am quite certain, if I had been ever so rich, I should have worked at something, and worked hard, too, for my own pleasure. I think this Association for the sale of work

is a grand thing. You know, it is much pleasanter for me than taking my performances about, and asking people to buy them ; and Lady Terry has done me as good a turn, in nominating me as a member, as Sir John has done for Ambrose, in getting him the clerkship in the Bank."

"Oh, well ; I am sure I am glad you are so easily satisfied, Mabel, and can sing over your work ;" for Mabel had begun a snatch of an old ballad with which she had often accompanied her needle. "It is very very different for me with all my sad remembrances ; this time last year how little I thought what was coming—losing my darlings and your dear father, and now to be left with scarcely enough to keep body and soul together." And, then, Mrs. Hampden's tears began to fall in that quiet way which is so hopeless and so depressing to those who have to witness it. Mabel had her memories, too,—for she had been tenderly attached to her father,—but she made a great effort to speak cheerfully,—

"Darling mother, the time is very short yet ; you cannot expect to feel very bright ; but we have a great deal to be thankful for. Chelstone is such a dear quiet old place ; and how nice it is to feel at home in this old house, where, I daresay, some grave old Franciscans lived in days gone by. It is so much, much nicer than our lodgings at Porchester, mother, in that stiff dirty little red-brick house, which was so precisely like the ten before it and the ten on each side of it, where we had scarcely room to breathe. Now the children have really space to move

about, and we are all quite well, mother. I never saw Rosie and Katie look better ; and as to Cyril, some ladies stopped Rosie this morning and asked whose beautiful child he was, only think, mother ! And listen now, how he is laughing in the room above us ; they are all playing there, and those deep window seats are capital places for the dolls. I think Mr. Evans was a clever old man to find such a lodging for Ambrose. Four rooms for fifteen shillings a week ! Why they would be double that money anywhere else ! And I do like, too, to feel that I am under the shadow of the dear old church. I can hear the organ as I sit at work ; and there is a sort of companionship in the voice of the clock as it chimes the quarters. Then there is Ambrose, mother ; he has only been in the Bank a month, but he is getting on so well ; and I believe he is happier than he was a year ago, though he feels, as we all must do, what a father we have lost. But, mother, there is a great comfort in thinking how he would be, perhaps *is*, glad when he looks down upon Ambrose working so bravely for us—so good to the little ones, so thoughtful for you.”

She did not include her own efforts, when she was going over her mother's causes for thankfulness. She did not even think that she was of any great service to her. Mabel Hampden, when she thought about herself at all, only wished she could paint, or draw, or teach music, or do anything well enough to make money.

But she did not sit down idly and do nothing because she was not able to do great things. She was

clever at her needle, and for years past had got through the plain work of the family, and much of the dressmaking, also ; and, though she did not speak French or German, or play brilliant pieces on the piano, or sing the songs which other young ladies warbled forth, she was, as Ambrose said, "up to the fifth form of many grammar schools in her Latin and Greek, and before them in her historical knowledge 'by a long chalk.'" Strong in body, and healthy in mind, she was the good influence in her little home sphere, as Violet Douglas was in hers. But Mabel's was the firmer character of the two, and might have been too strongly marked, had it not been toned down and chastened by that deep abiding sense of His presence, which alone suffices to keep the resolute decided ones gentle, and the timid and retiring ones firm.

As Mabel rises from her seat by the window, and, folding up her work, says, "I have done so many leaves this afternoon that I will go out with Ambrose, if you like, dear mother," she is a fair picture of early womanhood. Her tall slight figure in the black dress, relieved only by a curl of shining hair, which made its way from behind her small ear, is lithe and supple ; her head is set well on her shoulders ; and, perhaps, Mrs. Hampden may be forgiven the regrets that she so often expressed that her choice flower was thus to blossom in the shade,—that Mabel had to sit from morning to night stitching at her work, and vary her employment only by helping her mother with the little girls' lessons, attending to their wardrobes, and, above all, meeting the exigent demands which "baby"

made upon the whole family, as a youngest child of great beauty and intelligence is ever wont to do.

And now there was a clatter of little feet on the staircase, and the sounds in the room above ceased. The door was thrown open, and Cyril himself appeared between his two sisters, screaming a piece of intelligence at the top of his voice, "Amby is coming! Amby is coming!"

In another moment Mabel had opened the front door to her brother, and Ambrose raised baby on his shoulder, and went into the sitting-room with him; Rosie and Katie, two pretty little girls of ten and eleven years old, dancing behind, and asking, "May we come for a walk, Amby?"

"Me, too; me, too," chimed in Cyril.

"No, no, sir; you must stay and take care of the mother, and either Rose or Katie must stay to take care of you. I told you yesterday you must take the walk with me by turns," as he saw Katie's face fall. "Now, May, run upstairs and get ready." He spoke with authority, and there was no resistance to his decree. Mabel and Rosie disappeared, and Ambrose turned to his mother, who was smiling through her tears at baby's gambols with his brother.

"Well, how have you got on to-day? Cheer up, Katie, little woman," he said, pulling a lock of her brown hair; "you know it will be your turn to-morrow, and to-day is the to-morrow of yesterday, as some wise little girl in a book said; didn't she? Has old Mr. Mercer brought any complaints against you to-day for rioting and disturbance?"

"No ; they have been very good to-day," Mrs. Hampden said. "No one could complain of them, poor things ; it is very hard if they may not laugh. These old people are very fidgetty and particular."

"The verger of the Abbey church, you see, mother, has not been used to the row children make for many a long year. I dare say he and his wife do find the noise distracting enough sometimes. We must not offend the Mercers ; for old Evans did me such a good turn in persuading them to take us as successors to the lady and her two spinster daughters, who had lived here for fifteen years. Hallo ! who is that ?" A sharp rap at the little low oak door brought Mrs. Mercer from the back regions to open it just as Mabel and Rosie were coming downstairs. As she crossed the passage, Mabel heard some one inquiring for her brother, and the next moment a scent of cigars preceded Willie Douglas into the room. Ambrose coloured, and quietly putting Cyril on his mother's knee, gravely returned the young man's familiar greeting. Then he said, "Mother, this is Mr. William Douglas."

Mrs. Hampden bowed ; and then William Douglas chucked the baby under the chin, which he resented by saying "Don't," and, turning sharply round, said, "Introduce me to your sister."

"Miss Hampden," Ambrose replied shortly ; "these little girls are Rose and Kate. Will you sit down?"

"Thanks, no ; I came to ask you if you would take a turn with me. I am going to look at a mare I have heard of, that Hastings sold last week. I

think she may suit me better than the old cob I have been jogging about upon. Will you come?"

"Thank you, I am afraid I cannot," was the decided reply; "I am going to walk with my sisters."

"Ah! I am expected to dance attendance on mine, sometimes; but I get out of it. That sounds a very uncivil speech, Miss Hampden will say." But Miss Hampden would *not* say. She did not reply. And after lingering a few minutes, Willie Douglas moved to go. Ambrose went to the door with him, and then Willie said, "Was I missed at the Bank to-day?"

"Well, yes; I believe Mr. Douglas asked if you were come several times."

"Did he? What humbug it is expecting me! I shall cut it altogether at Christmas! Change your mind, Hampden, and come on to Willis's stables."

"No," said Ambrose; "I am not given to change my mind, thank you."

"You prefer being nursemaid and doing the meek brother, eh?" were Willie's last words, with a disagreeable laugh, as he turned into the strip of rather dingy-looking grass which ran round the Abbey church on the west side, separating it from the row of low gabled houses which were built of stone, but had been plastered and stuccoed till the original form of Monk's Court was utterly lost.

"Oh! Ambrose, what an intolerable man," Mabel said, as she and her brother set off at last; "so conceited and patronizing; how can you put up with him?"

"A clerk in his father's office must put up with

anything ; but we gave him rather a cool reception, I must confess. They are all high and mighty, the whole Douglas set, May, beings of a class apart from me and Dene and Evans. Have you seen the youngest girl yet ; your likeness, May ?”

“No ; I saw the carriage pass yesterday, as I was coming out of church ; but I could not distinguish the one you say is like me from the others. I hope she is not like her brother, too !”

“No ; he is after his mother’s type and the eldest daughter, who, people say, is going to marry the young squire of Hurst Hill. There are to be all manner of rejoicings and festivities on the first of January, when he comes of age. Some fireworks for you, Rosie, to look at, and bonfires on all the hills in the neighbourhood.

“Oh ! how nice ; and shall we see them from our house, Ambrose ; and may we stay up late, Mabel ?”

“We will settle that on New Year’s Day,” said Mabel ; “there is Christmas to come first. Oh ! I wish it were over, although I ought not to say so.”

“It will be a dreary time with the poor mother, I am afraid,” said Ambrose ; “but we must be patient with her. I hope you are considerate to her, May ?” Mabel winced a little at this ; and, if there had been light enough, Ambrose might have seen that the long dark lashes which shaded her grey eyes were dim with tears as he went on. “Our mother had been crying a great deal this afternoon, I saw ; don’t encourage her to go over the past, it can do no good ; nothing will bring them back, whom we have lost.”

"No," said Mabel; "but I like to talk of them. I could not bear, Ambrose, that our father's name should never be spoken, and Cherry and Maudie allowed to fade out of remembrance; they are ours still, and I don't feel them far off, only as if we were separated for a little while; they gone to their rest, and we left to our labour."

Ambrose walked on in silence after this; and when they reached the lodge gates leading to Hurst Hill, he stopped, saying, "It is too late to go further."

"Perhaps it is," was Mabel's rejoinder; "but I like a walk by starlight—it is a greater rest to my eyes after all my stitching."

"Well, don't stand here," said Ambrose; "I hear some people coming down the drive. Come, May!"

The people, however, had turned out of the lodge gate before May had moved on. The young squire himself was walking first with a tall young lady, and behind were two more girls, who were vainly endeavouring to make a little dog follow them.

"Come, Trove! come!" said a voice Ambrose recognised. "I really cannot carry you now your leg is well. Oh, thank you!" Violet Douglas said, as little Rosie picked up a book which she let fall from her muff when she stooped to tie a ribbon to a collar round the dog's neck in order to drag him along."

"Come, Violet!" Lucy exclaimed; "the others will be out of sight, and it is getting quite dark; leave that stupid dog to go where it likes, it is a bother to everyone."

Violet had now recognised Ambrose, and she said, "How do you do?" in a sweet pleasant voice which was quite irresistible. Ambrose, who had stood grimly by making no attempt to call himself to Violet's recollection, was now obliged to take off his hat and respond to her greeting.

Meanwhile, Trove resisted the string after the manner of all ill-bred and untrained little dogs, and Violet said she supposed she must carry him, when Rosie eagerly exclaimed, "Oh! please, may I carry him?"

"What! has he found favour in your eyes, too?" said Lucy. "Ugliness seems to be a recommendation in his case. Positively, Violet, I shall go on without you."

But Rosie had now lifted Trove in her arms, and the whole party moved on at a quick pace; the two figures in the road before them still keeping far in advance.

Lucy entered into no conversation, and Mabel did not open her lips. Occasionally Violet tried to make an observation to Ambrose, but he answered shortly; and no one was sorry when the iron gates under the lime trees were reached, and Rosie prepared to part with Trove.

There was a slight pause while the child delivered Trove into his mistress's arms, when the sound of a horse's feet, galloping madly up the road, made them all start, and go within the iron gate for protection. The next moment a voice called, "Look out!" and Willie Douglas turned sharply towards the gate, check-

ing the horse suddenly while it reared and plunged and resisted the bit, and threatened to throw its rider and knock down those who were standing by.

It was a desperate contest, and Ambrose bid his sister follow Miss Douglas, who was entreating them to do so, as she herself went up the drive towards the house.

"Stand clear, there!" Willie Douglas called out. "I'll have her up to the door! I'll not be beaten!"

"Better not try her any more, now," Ambrose said; "let her have her fling up the road, and then come back."

"What do you know about it?" was the answer, while Violet's entreaties to her brother to "take care" were unheeded.

Willie Douglas was excited with several glasses of brandy and water which he had taken when at Willis's stables discussing the merits of the horse which he had now pledged himself to buy. He was angry, too, at the evident signs of vice in her, and he was, besides, determined to show off his horsemanship to Ambrose. He lashed the mare to positive frenzy, and succeeded in turning her head towards the gate. The horse dashed through it, throwing little Rose Hampden down just as she had quitted Mabel's side in her terror, and galloping round the drive, past the steps where Violet and her sisters stood looking on in alarm, it went out at the other gate nearer Chelstone, throwing its rider amongst the laurels and arbutus bushes which skirted the gravel sweep. These broke his fall. Willie was not hurt, and soon emerged hat-

less and discomfited, laughing a hollow laugh, and saying,—

“The brute is disappointed, and has not been the death of me this time. Don’t make a fuss!” as his sisters came towards him with the young squire; “pray don’t make a fuss; there is no harm done!”

“I say, Douglas,” said Frederick Hastings, “you don’t mean to say that you were riding the bay mare I sold Willis last month? She was always brimful of vice when her blood was up. Why didn’t you ask me before you tried her? You have not bought her, I should hope?”

“All right!” Willie tried to say, cheerfully; but a stern voice near him said,—

“It is not all right. Your mad folly has done mischief which you may never be able to repair. The horse has knocked down a child by the gate, whom I have ordered to be carried into the house.”

Mr. Douglas’s voice seemed to calm Willie at once; he changed his bravado tone,—

“What child?” he asked.

“The young sister of one of my clerks,” was the reply. “They are carrying her into the house, I tell you.”

A crowd of servants had collected by this time, and in the gathering darkness of the December afternoon it was very difficult to ascertain what the result of the accident might be.

Ambrose had raised his little sister in his arms, and was determined to carry her home, while Mabel wished her to be taken into Cranstone House and immediately attended to.

"She is quite insensible ! Oh, Ambrose ! Ambrose !" Mabel pleaded ; "do let her be carried into the house. It is a long way to Chelstone ! She may die before we get there !"

"You had much better let the child be properly looked after, sir," said the butler. "I daresay it is only a faint."

Then a chorus of maids' voices arose, and there was clamour and confusion. But Ambrose still stood motionless. When Mr. Douglas and his daughters came down to the gate, he turned, as if to proceed at once to Chelstone. It was then Mr. Douglas laid his hand upon his shoulder,—

"No, Hampden," he said, with authority ; "your sister must have the necessary assistance in my house, as my son has caused this accident. I have already sent for a medical man. Bring her into the house."

Ambrose obeyed now, and bore his burden into the bright hall. His young brow was stern, and his lips compressed, as the child's pale face was at last revealed under the brilliant gaslight, and a variety of exclamations of pity and sorrow broke forth.

"Oh, poor child ! poor little thing ! Is she fainting, or is she——" Mrs. Douglas could not finish the question, and she signed to Ambrose to follow her to the nearest room, where poor little Rosie was laid upon the bed.

Mabel stood by, and Ambrose, while various means were tried to restore the child to consciousness. At last the doctor came, and as Willie Douglas moved from the doorway to let him pass, there was an ex-

pression of pain and misery on his face that sent his mother to his side at once.

"Oh, darling!" she said, "do not fear! She will soon recover. Think what a mercy it is for us that you are not hurt, Willie! Willie!"

"Suppose she should die!" he said, in a hoarse whisper. "I have killed her!"

"Don't say hard things, dear boy, of yourself. There are others who have been the cause of such sad accidents before now. You could not help it; only how was it you were on such a horse. Where was Ronald?"

The question brought back the whole story of his folly to Willie's mind. He shook off his mother's hand and walked away. Ronald was exchanged for Firefly, and he had signed an agreement with the horsedealer that very afternoon to pay sixty pounds for his bargain within three months' time. He had been complimented by the wily horsedealer on his skill in managing Firefly when he had tried her on two previous days. Imaginary aspirants for the possession of her at fabulous prices were quoted. One or two of his ill-chosen companions, the sons of rich farmers in the neighbourhood, had implied that it must be a crack rider to manage her; and thus, with a half-expressed compliment and a half-expressed doubt, had played so well into Mr. Willis's hands that afternoon over the brandy and water, which was liberally dispensed in the little stuffy back-parlour behind the stables, that the result was such as we have seen.

It is a weary task to write of sin and sin's punish-

ment, and a sad and grievous thing to contemplate the many homes which are made miserable by one self-willed, disobedient boy. There are many who, like the eldest son of the Chelstone banker, are laying up a store of wretchedness for themselves and others of which in their wild, reckless, undisciplined youth they can little dream, and who will have to bear the bitter consequences of their sins even in this world. It was William Douglas's misfortune that his mother, as Violet had told Grannie, idolized him. Countless were the heartaches he caused her, deep the pain, and almost unceasing the anxiety ; but she was always finding excuses for him,—always trying to shield him from his father's anger,—always in her secret heart thinking there were few so handsome, and few so agreeable and charming as Willie could be when he chose. Perhaps it was so ; and, perhaps, it may be thought that Mrs. Douglas was more than commonly weak in her fondness for her son. I am afraid, however, such weakness is not so very rare ; I am afraid that to love not wisely, but too well, may be laid to the charge of many another mother besides her of whom I write.

We must needs take our maternal love to the Great Refiner ; we must needs cry to Him for wisdom and for help, not only when our babies lie upon our knees and we delight to awake in them the first sweet signs of answering love,—not only when our little ones totter across the floor with uneven tread, and later still look to us for all their pleasures, and tell us all their troubles,—not only in early boyhood, when we

send them forth to brave the trials of the world of school for the first time ; but, also, when man's estate is reached ; when temptations come thick and fast. Then, happy is the son who has a wise mother—wise in the wisdom which cometh from above, strong in the strength which God alone can give.

Dr. Francis reassured the anxious watchers by little Rosie's bed. "She was stunned by the fall," he said, "and there was an awkward cut over her eye ; but she would do well, very well. She must be kept quiet for a day or two, and certainly not moved from the bed where she was then lying that night."

Rosie returned to consciousness very soon after the doctor came, and seeing Mabel's distressed face bending over her, tried to smile, and made an effort to throw her arms round her neck. But it was too much for her, and tears gathered in her eyes as she said, in an excited tone, "Where am I ? Where is the horse ? Why did that man ride after us ? We did not like him when he came to see us ?"

"Hush, hush, darling !" said Mabel ; "you must not talk !"

"Who is that ?" the child asked, looking at Violet, who stood with a pale troubled face at the bottom of the bed. "She is like another Mabel."

"Come, come, my dear," the doctor now interposed, "you must be quiet now ; you are going to sleep in this pretty bed to-night, and then to-morrow I hope you will feel nearly well again."

"I want to go home, please," said Rosie. "I must go home, Mabel."

Mabel bent over her little sister and whispered a few words, and the child said no more, but submitted patiently to have the cut on her forehead sewed up, and took the draught Dr. Francis gave her without a murmur. A short whispered conversation followed between Ambrose and his sister, which ended in his deciding to leave Mabel with Rose, while he returned to Monk's Court to tell his mother of what had happened.

"Come into the drawing-room a moment," Mrs. Douglas said, as she left Violet and the faithful nurse of the family with little Rose. "We shall be so anxious to save you any trouble or expense in this unfortunate affair, Mr. Hampden," she said. "Dr. Francis does not think your little sister seriously hurt, and you may entirely trust him ; he is so skilful, and has attended us for years."

Ambrose thanked her, and said he was sorry that so much trouble was caused, and hoped Rose would be able to go home the next day.

"I think we must leave Dr. Francis to decide that question," was Mrs. Douglas's reply. "Please assure your mother that everything shall be done for your little sister's comfort ; and, if she is inclined to come here and satisfy herself, I hope she will do so." And then Ambrose bowed, and was soon on the Chelstone road again.

On his way, he met a groom leading a horse slowly up the road, and by the light of the gas-lamp near the house Ambrose saw it was one of Mr. Douglas's servants.

The man recognised Ambrose, and paused. "He has been and done it now. This here mare was as mad as a March hare, what with *her* temper and what with *his*. She cut right through the windows of Jeffard's new shop, and there'll be a pretty penny to pay there. I was told to go after her and see her safe in Willis's stables; but, lor bless you! they say she's the young master's property hard and fast, and that she is as mild as a lamb, except when she is in bad hands like Mr. William's. There's a pretty compliment, and he so set up about his riding!" and the groom laughed scornfully as he passed on.

Ambrose had a difficult task before him, and as he got near Monk's Court he wished Mabel had been with him. The fire was very low in the little sitting-room when he entered; for large fires were a luxury beyond the Hampdens' reach. The two candles stood unlighted on the table; and Katie, a child herself, was wrangling with Cyril about some trifling act of submission to her will; while Mrs. Hampden's black figure was clearly defined, as she sat in a large leather arm-chair by the fire, her widow's cap seen with a ghostly whiteness in the surrounding gloom.

"Really, Ambrose—really, Mabel, how late you are!" she began, in a tearful, fretful voice. "But where is Mabel—why has she gone upstairs before coming in here? and where is Rosie?" And then Ambrose told his tale in very few words; and Mrs. Hampden started up, saying she must go immediately to Rose.

"My dear mother, it is a long walk for you; and

Rosie is well taken care of. She has escaped any serious injury ; and Mabel is quite able to do all that is necessary."

But poor Mrs. Hampden was sure he was deceiving her—was sure that Rosie was more hurt than he would allow—said that all that day she had felt a presentiment of coming evil ; and she wept floods of tears, while Katie joined her, and Cyril grew more clamorous and restless. It was a very sad, uncomfortable evening, and Mabel was missed at every turn.

"And a good thing, too, that they should miss her," was Mrs. Mercer's remark, when the little maid, who had taken out the tea-things and the loaf of bread from the parlour, reported : "The lady was taking on dreadful, and they didn't seem to be like themselves without Miss Mabel."

"A good thing they should have to miss her," Mrs. Mercer repeated. "I do dislike to see folks put upon by their own relations. Them children are spoiled enough as it is ; but if Miss Mabel weren't by, it would be something past my endurance. I daresay the child was scampering across the road now, like a wild thing, when the accident happened."

"Well, my dear," said Mr. Mercer, who had a dreamy abstracted manner which had grown upon him in the 'Abbey,' as he called it, and suggested that he was always saying over in his mind, if not with his lips, the history of all the old monuments and all the antique chapels, and making a dreamy rhyming chronicle of all the musty traditions which gathered round the church—"my dear, I think you

might do worse than step into the parlour and inquire about the child."

"She's awful cut about the face," the little maid here ventured to put in; "and they are afraid she has percussion of the brain. The lady is crying and taking on dreadful."

"Attend to your work, Phœbe, and don't bring gossip from the lodger's parlour, if you please. I may look in presently, and see how Mrs. Hampden is; but it is my opinion, if she roused herself up a bit, and did not sit so much looking at the picture of her poor husband and children, that are safe in heaven, but made an effort to restrain and rule the children that are left her on earth, she would be more in the way of her duty as a Christian."

"My dear," said Mr. Mercer, in his little squeaking voice, "you must remember you never lost a child,—no, nor a husband," he added, with emphasis. "You must remember that, my dear."

"I do remember it, Mercer," was the sharp reply; "as you are sitting there opposite me, with your feet on the fender I polished so bright this morning, I have no cause to forget it."

Mr. Mercer gently removed his feet from the fender, and relapsed into silence.

CHAPTER IV.

HURST HILL.

"Si l'on perd la danse à trente ans, on acquiert la liberté. Heureux ceux qui font durer pendant quarante ans ce crépuscule qui sépare la dernière jeunesse de la première vieillesse ! Car c'est l'âge d'argent, pendant lequel on fait ce qu'on veut et l'on dit ce qu'on pense."—PASCAL.

LIFE in a small country-town has been often described, and clever pens have often sketched for us the salient points by which, through the length and breadth of England, this life may be known. The sphere is confined and narrow. Every one knows his neighbour, and can tell some anecdote of what he does day by day. Dinners, and who eats them and what is eaten,—dress, whether expensive and showy, or dowdy and costing little,—illness, servants' delinquencies, family quarrels, family anxieties, money difficulties,—all are sifted and discussed by the little world of Chelstone, or of any other place of like dimensions ; and each one of its members may be startled in turn by hearing that what has really happened to him, or what he has actually said or done, is known by others, and that the people who relate the story

seem to be more fully acquainted with its details than he is himself.

Now, though there is sometimes a sting in this gossip—and sometimes a poisoned sting too, which changes it into scandal or slander,—I do think there is a reverse to the picture, as to every other picture of the same kind. Human nature is alike everywhere ; and if in the small concerns of a little country-town weaknesses and imperfections pass before us so closely that we cannot help seeing them, so also kindliness of feeling and genuine good nature, and unselfish interest in the welfare of others, are also brought out in a strong light. I know that it is very common to hear the dwellers in great populous cities, or gay fashionable watering-places, speak with a pity which is akin to contempt of those who are condemned to live in a small country-town and know by sight every man, woman, and child in it. They say no one can go away for a week, and no one can come home without the fact being proclaimed. If you have a sore throat, every one inquires for you ; if you are anxious about an absent relation, every one condoles with you. Well, are not these signs of a community of feeling and a general interest in one another, which is, after all, pleasant? Life in Chelstone may be quiet and dull,—and it may have its drawbacks and vexations,—but there are some who would choose it, nevertheless, a thousand times before life in a great, busy, populous place ; above all, a place where crowds resort for fashion, pleasure, or for health ; and where in the wilderness of villas, and terraces, and crescents,

and parades, there is a solitude far more oppressive to responsive and clinging natures than there could ever be for the Hampdens in Monk's Court.

The history of little Rosie's accident was known throughout Chelstone the next morning. When Ambrose went to the Bank, he found Mr. Dene and Mr. Evans in full possession of all the particulars; and even on his way there one of the clergymen connected with the Abbey church stopped to inquire for Rose. The amount of injury she had received was, of course, magnified; for little Rose was by no means too ill to enjoy the nice breakfast brought to her by Violet Douglas, and to admire the pretty lilies of the valley on the cups of the invalid set, or the rose-bud chintz of her bed and the pictures on the wall.

Violet bent down to kiss the child, and said, "I promised your sister to look after you; you must stay with us two or three days, till you are quite well. I wish your sister could have stayed, too."

"She couldn't," said Rose; "she is obliged to finish the work by the day after to-morrow, and Katie couldn't dress baby, or help mamma, you know. But, please, I should like to go home, if Ambrose comes for me;" and Rosie's lips quivered; for, as she mentioned the names of her brother and sisters, she began to feel home-sick.

"I daresay your brother, and your mamma too, will come and see you, dear; but we must hear what Dr. Francis says before we let you go home."

Rose was quiet again, but presently said that

sitting up to eat her breakfast made her head feel heavy, and that the cut over her eye throbbed.

Then Violet decreed that she must lie down again and be very still, and not talk too much.

"Will you talk to me, please?" said the child; "you are like Mabel, only——" She did not finish, and Violet supplied the word—"only not so pretty. No, Rosie, that is quite true."

"But your hair is the same colour, and there is the same look in your eyes. Mabel is so good; never one bit cross: but we have to mind what she says; and, then, she works so hard."

"Makes all your frocks, I daresay," said Violet.

"Oh! we have not had any new frocks since our black ones; it is other work I mean—work that is paid for, you know."

"Paid for!" said Violet, in a surprised tone.

"Yes; it goes to London to a place where work is sold. Very rich ladies order it, you know; and Mabel has to write her name on a little ticket, to sew on the work when she finishes it. I did the plain button hole round the edge of a whole row of flowers the other day, in the embroidered skirts she wants to send off on Wednesday: that is why she was in such a hurry to go home before breakfast this morning."

Violet listened in surprise. So this graceful lady-like girl, who looked so bright and clever, worked as a seamstress for money. The knowledge of this seemed to bring the fact of well-bred poverty more closely home to her than it had ever been before, and she could not repress the exclamation, "How good your

sister must be !” Rose was about to answer when the gong sounded, and Violet said she must go to breakfast, and would ask Patty to come and sit with her.

“Patty was our nurse when we were children,” Violet said ; “she is such a dear, kind creature ; and we still call the room where she sits the nursery. You must go and see it ; my doll’s house is there ; and Trove keeps Patty company, because mamma does not like dogs in any of the other rooms. Here is Patty ! Now she will tell you all about me, and how naughty I was when I had the measles.”

Lucy came into the room with Patty, and said,—

“Violet, pray come to breakfast ; there is mischief brewing, and Constance is not down. She says she has a headache, and mamma is in the very lowest depths.”

Then, as the two sisters crossed the hall, Lucy said,—

“Papa had Willie in the study ever so long last night, and, I believe, mamma has been crying dreadfully. She came into our room just now and told us papa was very angry with Willie. He is pledged to pay for that horse, it seems, and has heaps of other debts too. Actually he has been borrowing money of that horrid creature, Jarvis’s son—imagine such a thing—and the man has written to papa to pay—so sneaking and contemptible !”

Mr. and Mrs. Douglas were seated at either end of the table, when Lucy and Violet went into the room. Mrs. Douglas looked, indeed, as if tears had been

raining from her eyes. Her husband was sipping his coffee, with the *Times* lying by the side of his plate, and did not look up from it; not even when Violet put her arm round his neck, and said "Good morning!" did he speak, merely raising his head a little as she kissed him.

It was a dreary and silent breakfast. Just at the close, Willie came in with an assumed care-nought manner, and seated himself next to his mother.

"How is the child this morning, Violet? and where is her pretty sister?" he asked in the most indifferent way.

"Rose Hampden has had a good night," Violet said gravely; "but Dr. Francis has not seen her yet."

Willie drummed on the table with his fork, while Lucy helped him to some meat-pie, and brought him his coffee, which had been kept hot for him, and made an effort to talk in a random way of every conceivable subject.

His father tried to endure it for a few minutes; but, at last, with an impatient gesture, he pushed his chair back, and went out of the room without a word. In a few minutes the hall-door was heard to close sharply, and Mr. Douglas passed the dining-room windows on his way to Chelstone. At the gate he met a figure clothed in deep widow's mourning, whom he divined at once to be Mrs. Hampden coming to see her child. His first impulse was to pass her without speaking, but there was something in her sad, depressed face which touched him.

"Mrs. Hampden, I think?" he began. "I am

happy to tell you your little daughter is better this morning, and I hope the effects of her accident will be only temporary."

Mrs. Hampden bowed, and faltered her thanks for his kindness, saying her daughter Mabel had come home early, and had greatly relieved her anxiety about Rose. But the poor widow continued,—

"My cup of sorrow has been very full, and this seemed to make it overflow. Allow me to thank you, Mr. Douglas, for your kindness, not only to Rose, but to my son. When I wrote to you, he was in urgent need of employment."

"Your son is conducting himself so well in the Bank," Mr. Douglas said kindly, "that I have no doubt he will be a valuable clerk; so the benefit will be mutual. Moreover, it has been a pleasure to me to serve the son of one whom I knew in early life."

"Thank you! thank you!" murmured the poor widow. "Ambrose will, I am sure, do his duty: he is a good son to me. God has blessed me in my children."

"And there can be no richer blessing," Mr. Douglas said, as he extended his hand to her, and shaking it kindly, pursued his way to Chelstone.

Poor Mrs. Hampden entered Cranstone House with tearful eyes and a sad heart; but she left it with very different feelings. Dr. Francis, who paid his visit when she was there, told her that Rose would soon be quite well; and, as to the mark over her eye that the cut might leave, her face was pretty enough to bear that without losing much.

Then Rose seemed so happy and so tenderly cared for, and Violet was so kind, and said she should like to keep Rosie for a week—it was nearly as good as having a little sister of her own. Mrs. Hampden felt quite sorry when the time came for her to return ; but she knew she could not leave Mabel longer with only Katie to take care of baby—it would stop her work, and that was getting behindhand already. “It is work,” she said to Violet, “that must be finished by the twenty-third, if possible, and Mabel is very anxious to do so.”

Rose, who was listening to the conversation, here interposed, “I told Miss Douglas about the work, mamma ; do you mind ? I told how May works for us, to help us to get what we want.” The colour came to Mrs. Hampden’s face.

“Your brother did not wish you to tell it, Rose,” she said ; “but never mind. I don’t know why we need be ashamed that Miss Douglas should hear that I have, including Ambrose’s salary, which will only be paid quarterly of course, a little over two pounds every week to feed and clothe you all. Indeed, till Ambrose receives his salary we have to beg Mr. Mercer to wait for his rent ; but in time there will be a little more, I trust. Just now we are suffering from the expenses of illness, leaving our dear old home, and paying for dilapidations in the Vicarage House. But Ambrose tells me I must not give up hope, and that God will provide for us.”

“Yes, indeed,” said Violet ; “and I think, if papa knew—knew that——”

"Oh!" interrupted poor Mrs. Hampden quickly, "Ambrose would be very sorry to ask for anything out of the regular course ; and I am sure he would be vexed if he thought I had been telling you all this—Ambrose has such a proud, independent spirit."

Then Mrs. Hampden prepared to go, and Violet asked if Katie might come to see Rosie in the afternoon, when she was installed in the schoolroom under Patty's care.

"Katie will be so pleased," said Rose. "Oh, mamma ! do ask Ambrose to bring her ! Will you, mamma ?"

Mrs. Hampden promised, and went home with a lighter heart than she had felt for many months.

"Can you set off for a walk directly after luncheon, Violet?" Constance asked, as she met her sister in the hall after she had closed the door on Mrs. Hampden ; "or are you too much engrossed with these new friends of yours ?"

"Constance, I thought you were ill. Lucy said that your head ached so much that you could not get up ; I was just coming to look after you."

"Thanks, Violet ; but your attention would have been rather late. I am very well now ; but I want some air and exercise. I have a book I must take up to Hurst Hill. Harriet Hastings came home last evening, and Fanny said she wanted it. Will you come ?"

"Hurst Hill again !" Violet exclaimed.

The very faintest colour came into Constance Douglas's face, and she said, "Why not ? but pray

please yourself. Lucy is going to ride, and I happen to prefer your company to hers to-day."

Violet looked inquiringly into her sister's face, as she passed by the letter-box in the hall, and seemed to be reading the announcement written above, of the hours the post went out and the hours when the post came in. "Of course, I am glad to come with you, Constance, though I don't care much about Hurst Hill; but we will refresh ourselves on the way home by a visit to dear Grannie."

"You are very skilful in your management of old ladies, I know," said Constance, at last dropping a letter into the box, and turning towards the drawing-room with a slow, languid step. "You must give me some lessons; I daresay I shall need them."

"What can be the matter with her?" Violet said to herself, as she went to the schoolroom to arrange it for little Rosie's comfort when she was carried there. "Trove, dear, what is the matter with our beauty to-day, who is so uncomplimentary to us, and casts reflections on our tail and our poor straggling little legs? Trove, dear, you must stay at home this afternoon and amuse that pretty little girl, you know, who will lie on this sofa—so, Trove—and have my nice knitted quilt dear Grannie made for me to cover her feet." And it was strange to see all Trove's evolutions in answer to his mistress's address. He rolled his queer little body, with its short, stubbly, tawny hair, into every conceivable form from a comma to a prolonged note of exclamation. He whined and begged, and went through all the tricks Violet had taught him;

and, finally, curled himself up on her lap, and looked up into her face with a whole world of gratitude shining out of his small brown eyes, while she set herself to read a book her father had chosen for her, and which she enjoyed as one he liked, and one they could talk over together.

Violet, in her apostrophe to Trove, called her sister "our beauty," and, perhaps, there are few girls to whom the word might be more appropriately applied. Almost faultless features, a soft tinted complexion, wavy hair which could not be cured of its disposition to curl, and a light, supple figure, which was always, whether in repose or action, graceful—these were Constance Douglas's undoubted gifts. She had a voice, too, which had a charm in it for many ears, and if her words were never very numerous, they were well chosen; and those who admired her said she was clever as well as lovely, and had great powers of conversation. Such was Mr. Douglas's eldest daughter, in her quiet self-possessed satisfaction with herself forming so great a contrast to the bright, merry Lucy and the retiring and gentle Violet. Those who knew Constance were sometimes struck with the cold eyes which, though perfect in form and colour, had no earnestness of expression about them, and never answered the smile of her mouth, or glistened with tenderness when loving words left her pretty lips. How was it that misgivings as to whether she really cared for anything in the world but herself would shoot through those who loved her best sometimes, and a fear of unreality would creep even over her

little sister Violet, when she listened to her as she gave her opinions on the many vexed questions of the times with an unfaltering trust apparently in herself.

This afternoon, as the two sisters walked briskly up the Hurst Hill Road, Constance was not very communicative. Violet saw her mind was far away, and, failing to draw from her anything about Willie or their little home troubles and anxieties, she amused herself by gathering ivy leaves and moss from the hedges ; and as they turned into the grounds of Hurst Hill, she went into a plantation on the left hand to secure a beautiful branch of the spindle-tree, thinking it would delight Rosie.

"Look, Constance ! here is a lovely spray !" she said, returning to her sister's side. "I don't believe anyone gathers this but me, when I come to Hurst Hill. I daresay Frederick Hastings never saw it, and never heard of the spindle-tree. He goes about so like that man to whom—

'The primrose by the river's brim,
A yellow primrose was to him—'

"I know the rest ; spare me, Violet, and I know, too, you will never give the young squire the credit of—

'Wearing his wisdom lightly, like the fruit
Which in our winter woodlands looks a flower.'

"Ah ! that is Tennyson, I am sure ; you have a good memory, Constance. I never can call up a quotation so much to the point as that. No, certainly ; I do not give Freddie Hastings the credit for wisdom ; no one could do that."

Constance did not answer immediately, but presently said, "Do you remember Evelyn Watson, Violet?"

"Of course I do, Constance. Oh! is there anything nice to hear about him?"

"Well, that is, as people may take it," said her sister. "He is on the point of sailing for New Zealand; that is all."

"Oh! Constance!" and Violet's clear, soft, grey eyes looked up into her sister's, which returned the glance just as they always did.

"Yés; I wrote to him to-day a valedictory letter—you see, Violet, it was not worth troubling papa about it—and if I had to live a hundred years I should not change my mind. So, when Evelyn said he was coming to the Sandersons at Christmas, and expected me to rejoice in the fact,—and, also, that he had now a situation in the Admiralty which would set all doubts about pounds, shillings, and pence to rest,—why, I thought it was time to intimate that life in a little house in St. John's Wood or Denmark Hill would not quite suit me; so, though poor Evelyn and I have been friends for so many Christmas times, and have woven so many hollies; and danced under so many misletoes, there is an end to it now. The poor fellow threw up his appointment, said his health was delicate, and he sails for New Zealand on New Year's day. Now I tell you this, Violet, that you may not be shocked if you hear anything else startling about me, and that you may help me to ward off the old Sandersons' regrets or wonders next time we dine there. Do you understand?"

"No, Constance ; I don't understand you at all. I thought you cared for Evelyn ; I thought you admired him for his goodness and for his reality. I thought you used to say you liked him so much. Oh, Constance ! Indeed, you *seemed* as if you did. Perhaps you have broken his heart."

"My dear child, hearts don't break in these days ; the natural formation has grown a few degrees more tough and horny since the years of romance and chivalry. I am sorry Evelyn thought it necessary to be off to the antipodes—to some relative in Nelson, he says, who will let him earn his bread. I hope it will be sweet and plentiful, for he deserves it. What a lovely view this is ! Now, Violet, come in and be agreeable. I am not worse than the rest of the world ; I flatter myself I am a little better."

Violet was silent. They were now nearly in front of the stately mansion—which had been the home of the Hastings for upwards of two hundred years.

The park sloped down the hill-side, and the house stood on its crest. Below lay the town of Chelstone, clustering round the Abbey church, which was just now touched by a crimson glory in the western sunshine of the winter afternoon. Beyond the town there was the low, flat country, where the water which intersected the peat-fields shone like plates of polished steel, and through this the train was now seen gliding noiselessly along. To the right was the chain of hills, and the smiling landscape lying at their feet, while here and there a cottage casement glittered in the level rays of the sun, or the little windows in a village church

blazed as they caught its brightness. A new wing had just been added to Hurst Hill ; a conservatory of modern proportions had taken the place of the low stiff glass-house which Frederick Hastings's grand father had taken such pride in. An airy billiard-room, supported on graceful pillars, was also just on the point of completion ; and here the interest of Frederick Hastings certainly seemed to culminate.

He was standing on the steps leading to it, holding a consultation about some decorations for the eventful first of January, when the sisters came in sight.

"Miss Douglas, look here now ; what do you say to a heap of flowers in pots at the end of the room ? I say we don't want them ; they would be in the way ; but Aunt Fanny has been planning it."

"As a rule, one cannot have too many flowers," said Constance ; "but, perhaps, with the conservatory open, and the room all decorated, a few evergreen wreaths would be enough here."

"Exactly what I think," said the young squire delightedly. "I'll speak to you again about this," he said to his faithful factotum, who began to think the attaining of his young master's majority a more serious matter than the eighteen years which had preceded it. "Now come in and see grandmamma—and both the aunties are at home, I believe. Hattie is going to put our eyes out with her magnificence at the ball. I am glad no greater harm came of Willie tackling with that spiteful young vixen Firefly. The little girl is all right, he tells me."

"No, not all right," said Violet, correcting him. "She has a sad cut over her eye, which will always leave its scar, I am afraid ; still it is a comfort there was no more serious injury."

"Yes, indeed ;" and then he walked before Constance and Violet to the door of the small drawing-room, where he knew he should find his grandmother and one of his aunts. He announced "Miss Douglas, grandmamma," in a voice which had something like triumph in it.

A lady rose from a small writing table by the fire as the two girls entered. She was dressed in the very extreme of the fashion ; and, certainly, it would seem that the hoary head of which I have spoken, when telling of Violet's visit to her grandmother, was not owned or accepted by Mrs. Hastings.

Nearly, if not quite seventy, all the neighbourhood of Chelstone—which was pitiless in its chronicles of age—knew Mrs. Hastings to be. But there was not a line of grey in the dark hair which was rolled, and puffed, and be-ribboned like a girl's. Her features were hard and handsome, and there was always a bloom on her cheeks. As to the rest, she was made up of rings, and chains, and bracelets, which she wore in too great profusion at all hours of the day ; and there was something akin in the rattle of these ornaments when she moved, to the chatter which she ceaselessly kept up on trivial matters touching herself, her family, and him on whom so many hopes were centred—the young grandson to whom she had been appointed guardian by her son, who died within a

year of his wife, eighteen years before this period. This determination to set aside the flight of time was the same with Frederick Hastings's two aunts as with their mother. They were both considerably over thirty. Chelstone chronicles were again quite decided that such must be the truth, though with no help from peerage to decide the matter. There were times when the fact that Miss Hastings was a little more than five and twenty, and her sister younger, had to be accepted, because no one had courage to deny it. They were two single, unoccupied women who had no real aim or object in their lives but to make friendships and break them,—to dress, and dance, and dine, and chatter,—and amidst it all ever striving to pass for girls instead of women, and to lament pathetically the restrictions which their youth and inexperience laid upon them. And it is this effort to seem what we are not, which is surely the source of a great deal of mischief in these days, especially amongst women. But of all counterfeits, that of departed youth is the saddest and most vain. There is no position in life,—no age, no circumstance,—which may not be beautified by the great inner principle which alone can tone down minor defects of character, and soften little roughnesses and peculiarities. But I think it is safe to assert that no woman, married or unmarried, knows so well how to grow old gracefully, and accept the passing away of her youth, and enter into the real pleasures which are left to her, as she who is a Christian indeed, living—not to herself, but to God—not for herself, but for others.

The hour Constance and Violet spent at Hurst Hill was consumed by a great deal of small talk, and a great many descriptions of the glory of the coming thirty-first of December. For the birth-day was on the first of January, and was to be danced-in by all the friends and neighbours and relations who could be gathered together. Frederick Hastings was called away before Constance and Violet had finished their visit, and his absence was, as usual, the signal for praising him.

"That dear boy is so full of thought for others, he has scarcely a moment he can call his own just now," Mrs. Hastings began. "He is trying some horses to-day that will be the very thing for his break. The man wants four hundred pounds for them, Sanders tells me. I am sorry, my dear, to hear you had a little accident by your gate last evening—a child nearly killed—and by your brother, too. Curious, is it not, that Fred never ran over a creature in his life; he never was harum scarum. Such a minority as his, and such an easy post as mine has been, surely cannot find a parallel. And is the child likely to live?"

"So shocking," chimed in the two sisters.

Constance laughed her low, silvery laugh.

"My dear Mrs. Hastings, the child was very little hurt at all, thank you. She is under Violet's care,—she can tell you more about her. But, I think, if we are to look at your pretty things, Harriet, we must come at once. The days are so short,—and we must go in and see Grannie on our way home."

"Oh, poor old lady!—how is she?" exclaimed Mrs. Hastings; "I am really ashamed to think how long

it is since I paid her a visit. Do tell her I am coming soon, when all these grand doings are over. Very old people do miss little attentions, I know."

Grannie happened to be a few months Mrs. Hastings's junior ; but, as she wore her own silvery hair, and never exchanged her black silk for airy costumes, and was also feeble in health, and seldom left her fireside in winter, Mrs. Hastings could afford to speak of her as "very aged."

"Now, you know," said Harriet Hastings, "I would not show my dress to everyone ; but I suppose yours are made already."

"Oh, don't be afraid," said Constance ; "mine and Lucy's are not at all magnificent, and Violet thinks she is not coming to the ball."

"Not coming—not coming to the ball ! I never heard such nonsense !"

"Well, you know, she is but a child," said Constance. "If she likes to stay at home for another year, there is no harm in it."

"Oh, of course,—you and Lucy will like it best," said Fanny Hastings. "Now, what do you say to that wreath of Harrie's ; it won't suit her, I am certain."

"It is very grand," said Constance, quietly. "The colour of the dress is beautiful ; it is such a lovely green."

"I am glad you like it ; and observe the trimming, my dear—beetles' wings—actual wings ; and the cost, well—we won't say what. Fanny persists in wearing white ; but I am tired of it. What a funny little thing

you are," Miss Hastings continued, turning to Violet ;
"you don't seem to care for anything."

"We all have our particular tastes," said Violet, roused to something of Lucy's sharpness. "Mine happens not to lie in the direction of green satin gowns and beetles' wings."

"Oh, indeed !" said Harriet ; "tastes differ, as you say. Now, then, we will walk down the drive with you—not beyond the gates. I wonder you should walk out alone up the road ; there are so many bad looking people about. Besides, I don't think it is quite the thing for girls of our age to do."

"Oh, Consie !" said Violet, as she and her sister were at last outside the gates of Hurst Hill, and beyond the reach of the Miss Hastings's chatter. "Oh, Consie ! isn't it delightful we have not to live with the Hastings !"

"To live with them," said Constance, quietly ;
"what an idea !"

"Well ; I mean that, even for an hour, I feel as if I were being rubbed the wrong way—they are so silly."

"Violet, don't get into the habit of setting down your superiors in that way. The Hastings hold a certain position here, and many people would give anything to be intimate with them. Mr. Hastings will get into Parliament as his grandfather did ; and such an old family as theirs ought to command respect."

"Ought to, I daresay," was Violet's reply ; "but, unfortunately, they don't manage to do it ; and I am sure, if old Mrs. Hastings were any old woman in Chelstone—Mrs. Paget, for instance, or Mrs. Evans

at the Bank—we should call her very vulgar and offensive.”

“I shouldn’t,” said Constance, “as I don’t usually express myself so strongly about any one. I don’t think I shall come in and see Grannie to-day, after all. So give her my love, Violet, and tell her I will come to-morrow. Charlie is coming home; and I had better go and see if mamma is alone.”

“Very well,” was Violet’s rejoinder, as they parted at the gate of Milton Lodge; “only do come to see Grannie to-morrow. She always notices it, when you are so long without coming, you know.”

“I won’t fail to-morrow,” were Constance’s last words, as she walked briskly down the road.

CHAPTER V

DISAPPOINTED HOPES.

“ Strive, yet I do not promise
The prize you dream of to-day
Will not fade when you think to grasp it,
And melt in your hand away.
But another and holier treasure,
You would now, perchance, disdain,
Will come when your toil is over,
And pay you for all your pain.”

A. A. PROCTER.

“ THE very person I wanted—welcome, dear Violet !” was Grannie’s greeting, as she looked up from her little table, which was covered with papers, and where an account-book lay open, in which she was in the act of making an entry when her granddaughter came in. Perhaps the contrast she afforded to the grandmother Violet had lately parted from, struck her with greater force than usual ; for as Grannie lifted her quiet, serene face to Violet, and said, “ I want you to go through a little business with me, darling,” Violet threw her arms round her with earnest warmth, and said, “ Grannie, you do look so good, and so nice and pretty.”

"Compliments of the season, my dear Violet—but have pity on my cap ; now take off your hat and jacket, and help me to look over this list of people to whom I always send a mite at Christmas. Mr. Moorhouse has been with me this morning, and he has made my heart ache with his story of distress in the lower parts of Chelstone. I wish Mr. Digby could see it right to resign the living of the Abbey church. His curates cannot do justice to it, and it is so sad that there is no real head. But grumbling will not mend matters. Read that list over to me, my dear ; and then I will mark down in my book what I can afford in the way of coals and blankets. Your dear father left ten pounds with me yesterday afternoon. When you are a few years older, Violet, you shall be my almoner, if God spares me, I ought to say, to see a few more Christmas tides."

Violet did as she was told, and discussed the relative merits of people who should have coals and clothing ; and where there were children, Grannie did not forget oranges, and buns, and toys, and in a few instances a plum-pudding.

"Grannie," said Violet, as the last neat entry was made in a hand that would shame many modern hieroglyphics from younger fingers,—“ Grannie, you have heard about the accident last night to little Rosie Hampden."

"Yes, dear ; Lucy came in this morning, and gave me one of her random stories ; the child is not seriously hurt, for which thank God. There was some added trouble about Willie, too, I am afraid."

"Yes ; he and papa had one of their talks in the study last evening, which never seem to do any good ; only papa is silent and dejected after them, and mamma miserable, and Willie more determined to brave it out than ever. Where will it all end, I often wonder."

"We must pray, and have faith that our prayers are heard," Grannie said, gravely ; "and we must all be gentle and tender with Willie—love alone avails with boys like him ; but now tell me about these Hampdens."

"Yes, I want to do so, Grannie ; and I want you to see Mabel, the eldest girl ; you would admire her so much. Do you know, Grannie, she does] needlework to support her little sisters and brother ; and she is so graceful and lady-like, and her face—well, it looks as if it had sunshine from within shining through it. Mrs. Hampden is a poor, depressed, tearful woman,—not strong in mind or body, I should think ; and I fancy they have barely enough to get even the necessities of life. Little Rosie, in her childish way, told me all about Mabel's hard work ; and, then, poor Mrs. Hampden let out more. Now, I want to help them a little, and I don't know how to begin. It is so much more difficult than when one wants to do something for the poor ; and I am sure that the brother, papa's clerk, is very proud. He has such a determined mouth, and such straight, strongly marked eye-brows, rather like papa's ; and when he stood last evening with the child in his arms, saying he would take her home, he looked as if his will must be law to Mabel and to them all."

"It needs the most delicate courtesy and tact to offer a little help to people like the Hampdens," Grannie said ; "but there are many ways in which it is possible. Bring Mabel here to see me, Violet ; and if I take as favourable a view of her as you do, I will aid and abet your setting up a friendship with her, and then the path will be clearer by which you and I can do them some little kindnesses, perhaps."

"Thanks, dearest Grannie ;" and then she was silent for a minute, but presently began : "I am not going to the Hurst Hill ball, Grannie ; I am only just the age when girls are said to be out ; and I would far, far sooner put off growing up till another year. I am so happy, I am afraid of anything coming to disturb me ; and you know I am not wanted while Constance and Lucy like going out so much. You will tell papa I really and truly wish to stay at home, because I know he does not think it possible I can like it best."

"Yes, dear, I will tell him. I think, considering all things, your decision is a wise one. I am not at all anxious that my little Violet should leave the shade yet ; she is better where she is."

"Constance, dearest Grannie, has been talking to me about—. But, perhaps, I have no right to divulge her secrets," she said, correcting herself. "But I suppose there is no harm in my telling you what I think, is there?"

"No ; that betrays no confidence. Perhaps your thoughts about Consie and mine are alike."

"Grannie," exclaimed Violet, "I believe Constance would marry Frederick Hastings if he asked her!"

"Well, my darling, why should that disturb you?"

"Why? Oh, Grannie, to marry a man she *can't* love must be so dreadful,—and a mere boy younger than herself, who never looks into a book, who dresses like a dandy, who if good tempered is silly and empty-headed, and whom she will twist round her little finger from the first,—and, then, to marry only from worldly motives seems to me a sin. Constance, too! who sometimes talks as if she were full of serious thoughts, and so far beyond Lucy and me. Oh, dear Grannie, life is so full of puzzles! So I thought to-day, when I heard those foolish Miss Hastings talking about their ball dresses, and old Mrs. Hastings even more flippant and silly. Why should they have everything they fancy, and be able to spend, on a stupid green satin gown decked out with beetles' wings, more than would make the Hampdens at ease in their circumstances till Midsummer? Grannie, do *you* understand why these things are allowed to be?"

"No, dear child; I don't profess to understand; but like that old monk Felix, of whom several poetical legends have been sung, I can say, 'Lord, I believe, though I cannot understand.' Looking back on my long life, Violet, I can see the reason of much that at the time seemed mysterious and, as you say, puzzling. But, my child, God holds the solution of these problems of our mortal life in His own hands; and

one day, when we have crossed the threshold, and our vision is cleared from the mists of earth, we shall see into what perfection He has rounded the whole scheme which now we can discern only in tiny and seemingly contradictory fragments. Patient work, ceaseless efforts *to be* what we wish others to think us, and to trust our Lord with the results—this is life's great lesson, Violet."

"Grannie, I could almost wish I were you—you seem to have got the victory, and to have done with fighting, while I have it all before me; and I sometimes doubt if I shall ever conquer—the world creeps in at every corner—and I am so afraid of being satisfied with myself, because I don't want to go out much and have heaps of fine things. It is natural taste with me, Grannie, and, perhaps," she added, "not feeling very strong sometimes."

Grannie put her arm round Violet's little neck, and drew her head close, as she sat on her low stool at her feet. Thoughts of another Violet, who had once sat there, came over Grannie; that sweetest flower which had blossomed in the path of her early married life, and had drooped away and died when a storm swept over it. Of that other Violet, now, as she believed, blossoming in the Paradise of God, Grannie seldom spoke, though never a day passed but her image came before her in some form or other; especially when her little granddaughter sat as now, looking up into her face. It was with a throb of pain that Grannie heard her continue after a pause, perhaps, in answer to her anxious gaze,—

"I am well, Grannie dear,—quite well. But I feel as if I could not bear any great trouble ; I feel as if, when it came, I should not be brave or strong, however much I wished—that's all ; and so I am unwilling—afraid, perhaps, I ought to say—to go out, even into the little world here. I have a sort of dread of change."

There was a wistful, far away look in her sweet eyes as she spoke ; and Grannie's voice faltered as she said, "There is strength, dear child, for our utmost need, thank God."

But the next moment there was a clatter of feet on the narrow gravel walk before Milton Lodge, and a sound of boyish whistling, while the bell was pulled with such force that, as Martha said, she was frightened into fits ; and, then, the drawing-room door opened, and the schoolboy of the family came in with a whirl and a rush which brought the colour into Grannie's face, and made Violet start up and answer the boy's hug with one almost as fervent.

"I say ! I have been home, and there's not a soul there ! Cool treatment of a fellow, I must say !"

"Why, Charlie dear, we didn't expect you till the seven o'clock train. Mamma and Constance are at home ; are they not ?"

"I did not see a soul but old Patty, sitting in the schoolroom with a child with her head tied up, and such a brute of a dog !"

"Charlie,—that is my dear Trove,—you must not be so disrespectful."

"Come here, Charlie," said his grandmother. "How well you look !"

He did, indeed! the very picture of boyish health and strength. A fine frank open face, without his brother's personal attraction,—for his features were by no means remarkable,—but there was promise in that bright expressive countenance that Charlie would be a comfort.

"You needn't blab where you have been," had been said more than once by the elder brother; and the boy had replied, "If I am asked, I shall not tell a lie." Of a truthful boy there is always hope; and Charlie Douglas knew nothing of deceit and double-dealing.

"I say, Violet, have you got any jolly plans for these holidays? Have you asked papa about the party and the charades? And you will make mamma let me skate, if this frost goes on?"

"Charlie, you quite take away my breath," said Violet, who was getting ready to go home with her young brother. "There is no frost yet, I think."

"Isn't there?" said Charlie, indignantly. "There was a thin coating over the moors as we came along; only I haven't got any skates; I lost one of my old ones last year."

"Well, Charlie," said Grannie, drawing the steel rings of her netted purse, "here is something for the skates; with this reservation, that your father and mother approve of your going upon the ice when there is any."

"Thanks, Grannie," said the boy, returning to kiss Mrs. Douglas a second time. "Thanks, you are always so awfully jolly."

"I hope we shall not have flustered you, Grannie dear," said Violet, as she stooped to give her farewell kiss; "and you will come to dinner on Christmas-day? Say you will."

"If I feel up to it, you may depend upon me, darling. How bright and well that dear boy seems; it is a pleasure to look at him."

Violet and her young brother were soon at home; and Charlie raced up the wide staircase to his mother's little sitting-room, where Constance and Mrs. Douglas were found to be closeted, and where, indeed, they had been half an hour before, when Charlie had said there was not a soul to be seen.

"I came by the early train, because some fellows were coming by it as far as the Middleborough junction," Charlie said. "I looked in at the Bank; but papa was not there; and, then, I came slap up here, and told the omnibus to bring my luggage. The house was as silent as I don't know what: I thought you had all emigrated to New Zealand. I say, Constance, I saw Evelyn Watson at Winchester three or four days ago; he came to bid his sister good-bye. You know she is the wife of one of the masters. He was so glum and cross; and said he was going to New Zealand in earnest, as he was tired of London; he looked awfully seedy."

"You are so grown," said Constance; "isn't he, mamma?" ignoring her young brother's information. "You are very tall for twelve."

"Thirteen, if you please, in April," said Charlie.

"Mamma, have you thought about the charade party? Will you let us have some fun?"

"Yes, dear; you and your sisters must arrange it. A juvenile party, I suppose you wish for. Give me another kiss, Charlie; you have only bestowed a very shabby one on me," said his mother.

"There are the horses; that's Willie and Lucy," said Charlie. "I must run down and see them;" and he was off with a rush, leaving the door open, and clearing the stairs into the hall with two or three leaps.

Violet, who followed on her way to the schoolroom, saw that Charlie nearly overturned a little black figure at the foot of the staircase, which was creeping shyly up clinging to her brother's hand; and Ellis said, who was rather in advance, "Mr. and Miss Hampden have come to see Miss Rose Hampden."

"Oh, I will take you to the schoolroom," said Violet. "This is Katie, I suppose. Mr. Hampden, won't you come and see Rosie? She is getting on very nicely, and will be so glad to see you."

"Thank you," said Ambrose. "Perhaps she is well enough to return with us."

"Oh, certainly not," said Violet. "It is quite understood that she is to stay here till Christmas Eve. This way, please;" and opening the door of the schoolroom, Rosie was found tucked comfortably up on the wide old-fashioned sofa, covered with Grannie's scarlet and white quilt, on one corner of which Trove was nestling.

Rosie and Katie kissed each other gravely, as if impressed with the solemnity of the occasion, and

then carried on a conversation in a low tone, while Patty set out tea in the pretty lily of the valley cups, and Violet invited Ambrose to join the group by the fire ; for, after his first greeting to Rosie, he had stood rather aloof, looking at the long ranges of bookshelves, and making no attempt to enter into conversation.

"Do you despise five o'clock tea, Mr. Hampden?" Violet said, at last ; "if not, do come and have some ! I see you are taking a survey of our literature : there is a large library of children's books, from 'Jack the Giant Killer' upwards. Rosie has been dipping into them, I think. This is a book papa and I are reading ;" and as is so often the case, the discussion of the book broke the ice, and Ambrose found himself forgetting where he was in the keen interest with which he and Violet went over "Short Studies on Great Subjects," and the author's masterly treatment of them.

Meanwhile the little girls were exchanging their experiences. Katie's home budget was full. Baby had broken a little jug in mamma's bedroom, and Mrs. Mercer had been so angry ; but kind old Mr. Mercer said it did not matter a pin. And Mabel had broken a needle into her finger ; and, though she said it did not hurt, Katie was sure it did very much, and she had to work much slower. And baby had been to church with Mr. Mercer again that afternoon ; and he was so good, and never talked above a whisper ; and Mr. Mercer says he will soon know the stories about the monuments as well as he does.

"Isn't this nice bread and butter?" asked Rosie ; "and I had such delightful boiled chicken for dinner."

"Had you?" said Katie. "We had the salt beef, again ; and this was not a pudding day."

Patty came in every five minutes to cut more bread and butter, and supply some sponge cakes to the children ; and Patty noticed how flushed and bright Violet's face was, and how the young clerk, as she called him, seemed quite at home leaning against the chimney-piece sipping the cup of tea.

It was a bright half-hour ; but, when Constance and Mrs. Douglas came into the room, a shadow fell over it. Ambrose was the junior clerk in Mr. Douglas's Bank once more, and resumed his stiff cold manner ; so that at last, when he had taken the unwilling Katie away, Mrs. Douglas said, in a low voice to Constance, "He has not a very prepossessing address, poor boy. I think he might be a little more gracious under the circumstances."

"What can you expect?" was Constance's answer. "But take care, mamma, little pitchers——"

Rosie had heard enough to feel they were talking of her, or of those dear to her ; and she turned away her head, and buried her sunny curls in the cushions. "Patty," she said, when left alone with the old nurse, while the rest of the party were gathered in the dining-room—"Patty, is not Miss Violet Douglas much, *much* nicer than anyone else in this house?"

"My dear, I have had them all on my knee as babies, you know, and I love them all dearly. Miss

Consie, with her beauty, which is like a queen's ; and Miss Lucy, so sharp and clever and witty that she makes one laugh ; and, then, dear Mr. William"—and here Patty shook her head and sighed ominously—"well, he is the handsomest and kindest-hearted young gentleman. I used to be quite put to it to get along with him when he was a little thing : everyone would stop to admire him."

"Just as they do our baby," suggested Rosie.

Patty looked doubtfully, and said, "I never saw him, you know, my dear. Then there's Master Charlie ; did you ever see a nicer boy than he is ? But as to Miss Violet, she is beyond me,—she is the angel of this house ; that's what she is,—and its just like the flower she is named after. You feel she is about the house ; and she leaves a sort of sweetness behind her as she goes. Sometimes I say she is too good for us. When she was a tiny little thing, no higher than the table, she stopped at home one afternoon from going to a gay children's party at Hurst Hill, because I happened to be that ill with a sick headache I could not hold my eyes open ; and Master Charlie was apt to be troublesome and wild ; and the housemaid was ill, too ; and the under-nurse that then was had to attend the other children to the party. 'She liked it best,' she said ; and she kept Charlie as good and quiet as a lamb, and made me some toast with her dear little hands. Now those are the sort of things she is always doing, so quietly we forget to notice them. But, my dear, if I once begin tales of my children I shall never stop." And Rosie was only too glad to listen,

so Patty went on ; and, then, Rosie's vision became indistinct, and she mixed up Mabel and Violet in a sort of confused dream till she was recalled to realities by seeing a figure in a pretty white muslin dress, fastened round the throat by a rose-coloured ribbon, bending over her, and heard Violet's gentle voice saying, "Is she asleep, Patty?" Then Rosie roused herself, and rubbed her eyes ; and Violet read to her for half-an-hour, and ended with a few verses from the Gospel appointed for the day, and then she talked about it to the child ; and, as she told Mabel afterwards, "made all the prettiness of it come out, and made it all seem so real and true."

Little Rosie went to bed that night full of pleasant thoughts, and said to herself, with some regret, that there were only two nights more and she must go home. Yet home was sweet, and "they must want me," was the proud thought of this child of eleven years, who had been taught by necessity to think of others before she thought of herself.

The old Abbey church-clock had struck nine, when Mabel laid down her work with a weary sigh, saying to herself, "It is impossible ; I cannot finish it now." But though her finger was throbbing painfully, she hid the truth from her mother and Ambrose, and only said, as she bid good night, she was rather more tired than usual, and would go to bed. But no one knew how this brave girl's heart sank within her, as she felt that her favourite scheme of getting off the needle-work the next day must be relinquished now. Mabel was not given to tears ; but as she went slowly upstairs

she could scarcely restrain them. It would have been so nice to have had a post-office order on the twenty-fourth, she thought, and to have got a really good Christmas dinner for the children; and, then, there was the little tree with which Rosie and she had planned to surprise the others. The pain her finger gave her was very great, and a sudden thought struck her that she would consult Mrs. Mercer about it; so she retraced her steps, and tapped gently at the door of the half-kitchen and half-parlour where Mr. and Mrs. Mercer spent their evenings. A goodly smell of sausages and potatoes, fried to a nicety, greeted Mabel as the door opened, and fumes of hot spiced beer mingled with it.

"I beg your pardon, Mrs. Mercer; but I have hurt my finger, and I thought very likely you could tell me whether there is a bit of needle still in it: the pain is so great I cannot work."

"Dear! bless me!" said Mrs. Mercer, dropping the injured and highly-offended air she had worn since the jug had been broken, and examining the finger with a professional eye—"Dear! bless me! that finger must be poulticed; and you must not touch a needle for days, or you will be having the joint set fast. When did you do it?"

"This morning," said Mabel, "just after I came home; I snatched my work up quickly out of the basket, and I think baby had stuck a needle in it. Anyhow, it ran into my unfortunate finger, and broke off short."

"I tell you what, Miss Hampden, that child is a

troublesome little creature ; you will have to break him in. Now I am not hinting at my jug ; or the scratches he has been and made on the bannisters ; no, nor at the barley broth he spilled on my carpet, which cost three shillings and sixpence a yard only last spring twelvemonth."

"Tut, tut, my dear," broke in Mr. Mercer, "don't you go counting up grievances ; the child's very like one of them angels on Sir Launcelot Aylmer's monument. I could not go for to deny him nothing."

"We know you ain't gifted with wisdom, Mercer ; so you needn't trouble yourself to tell us so. I am only speaking for the good of the family Providence has brought under my roof, and from no selfish ends. Now, Miss Mabel, sit down, and if you'll wait a few minutes, I'll get a linseed poultice ready. I always have linseed in stock, as I make tea of it with liquorice for Mercer's cough. He gets a very wheezy cough in damp weather in the church. I suppose I mightn't offer you a sausage and a little fried potatoe."

"Thank you, no, Mrs. Mercer ; but please eat your supper before it gets cold ; I can wait."

"Lor, Miss ! do take a snack of something," said Mr. Mercer. "Perhaps one of your tea-cakes, Mrs M., would be more in the young lady's line ; there was one or two left, I fancy, from tea."

Mrs. Mercer hesitated a little ; but went to a cupboard and fetched out a tea-cake, which she split and buttered liberally, setting it before the fire to toast.

Mabel was not hungry, but she was afraid to seem ungracious, or, perhaps, be thought too fine to eat her supper with the Mercers; so she expressed great satisfaction in the tea-cake, and accepted a glass of elder-flower wine, which the old verger insisted on producing in her honour. Mabel talked pleasantly, and when her finger was comfortably dressed, and she rose to bid good night, she said: "I hope, Mrs. Mercer, you will be so kind as to forgive our poor baby his little misdemeanors; and, indeed, I will do my best to keep all the children quiet and good. I should be so sorry if they annoyed you. Thank you very much for doing up my finger so beautifully." She paused a moment, and then held out her left hand to her landlady.

"I am sure you are welcome, Miss Hampden; and as to the children, and the baby especially, I would not wish to be hard on him;" and Mrs. Mercer meant what she said. Baby's beauty, and his sister's appeal to her sympathy, won the day; and little Cyril was destined to reign with despotic sway over Mrs. Mercer, who had so often been heard to declare that "she was not to be ruled by anyone, and that she would stick up for her rights to the last point."

"There goes as nice a young lady as ever walked," was Mr. Mercer's emphatic declaration, as Mabel closed the door; "I'll just drink to her good health with what remains of the elder-flower wine, my dear." Mr. Mercer's hand was on the bottle, but his wife interrupted him,—

"You'll do no such thing, Mercer, if you please : wine and spiced beer don't agree ; so I'll just put the bottle away in the cupboard whence it came, and set the place to rights after all this disturbance."

Mr. Mercer had to submit, and lighted his pipe to console himself ; while his wife bustled about, saying, "I don't wish to say anything against Miss Hampden ; she works hard, and I only hope we shall see our rent at last. I think we shall, for both she and her brother have honesty written on their faces."

CHAPTER VI.

CHRISTMAS AT CHELSTONE.

"Through the blue and frosty heavens,
Christmas stars were shining bright;
Glistening lamps throughout the city,
Almost match'd their gleaming light.
White the winter snow was lying,
And the winter winds were sighing,
Long ago, one Christmas night."

A. A. PROCTER.

MABEL's finger was not cured in a day, and all hope of finishing her work even by the New Year was at an end. She wrote to the lady-secretary of the association, sending the skirt which was finished, and explaining the delay of the other, asking, too, if she could have the money due to her for the last order she had executed. The answer was a kind one; and touched with the simple words in Mabel's letter, "I want the money very much; we are so poor," the lady sent her two pounds towards the sum owing to her; but, alas! the elaborately embroidered camisoles had been ordered by a lady who was very slow in her payments, yet nevertheless was in such a position that the Association could not run the

risk of offending her by too urgent appeals for the money. "It will come in time," the writer of the letter kindly said ; and she hoped, when the skirts were finished, she should be able to send Mabel an order for the whole amount.

So, then, she must wait—there was nothing left for her but patience ; but it seemed very hard, and her enforced idleness, and Mrs. Hampden's melancholy forebodings and low spirits, made the day dreary enough. Mabel must wait for the money she had earned ; and *why* ? Because carelessness and thoughtless want of consideration in the grand lady who patronized the Association, and often recommended her friends to do so, prevented her from settling many small debts of the kind. The work of those camisoles was universally admired ; the lady produced them often, and would relate how they were done by a lady of limited means, and descant on the value of the Association ; and yet, while she was living in all the luxuries of life—no wish ungratified, no whim which could not be indulged—Mabel Hampden's Christmas was clouded, and her buoyant spirit for the time depressed, as she thought of how much that three pounds would have done to brighten those around her. This is no fancy picture. Very often, large, and what seem munificent orders for work are given, for which the secretaries and the workers are alike grateful ; and, then, the payment, which in these cases should be prompt, is lingering, and in some instances it has seemed almost hopeless to obtain it. This is not charity. There may be a kindly impulse, and a floating desire to help

those who are in need—especially with the young, who know nothing of the value of money—a wish arises to give a large order for fancy work or ornamental needle-work. But when the time for remuneration comes, milliner's bills may be pressing, or other demands have arisen which must be satisfied, and the lady driving in the park, and appearing at every fashionable party during the season, finds it inconvenient to pay for the work of one who may be as well or even better born than herself, and whose early years are passed in the grinding poverty, which it is so easy to write of—so easy to read about—but so very, very difficult for the affluent and “careless daughters who are at ease” to realize.

Mabel found the daily service, so easy of access at the Abbey church, a great help ; and, strange to say, baby was always quiet when within the walls of the Abbey. A sort of awe and reverence seemed here to creep over this jubilant child ; and Mr. Mercer said he was always as “meek as a lamb” when he was there, and to see him listening to the organ “was a picture.”

The child, in his little black suit and long light curls, clinging to the gown of the old verger, and trotting by his side when any visitors came to explore the Abbey, was a pretty sight. And now, on the day when Mabel had received the letter about her work, she took her little brother with her into the choir for evening service, and the boy was more serious and earnest than is common at four years old.

Mabel felt soothed and comforted by the prayers ; and her face had resumed much of its wonted bright-

ness when she came out of the great west door, little Cyril holding back and begging her to wait till the "music was over." The voluntary the organist was playing rose and fell majestically as only Mozart's music, perhaps, can swell in a church; and as little Cyril looked up into the vaulted roof, the childish remark to his sister was not inappropriate, "May, it goes up there; straight up to heaven." Outside the Abbey the spell which kept baby's spirit in bounds was broken. He began to caper and prance, and rushed away from Mabel to pick up an old hard cricket ball which one of the choristers, perhaps, had dropped on the grass. Mabel foresaw there would be broken window panes and cracked looking-glasses, if that missile was carried into the house, and decreed that the ball must be thrown away.

"I sha'n't," said baby, sturdily. "I'll throw it at Mrs. Mersy, I will."

"Cyril," said Mabel, in a determined voice, "give me the ball."

Cyril clenched it tight, and his rosy lips pouted, while at the same moment Mabel was conscious that the little contest with the child was noticed, and that Violet Douglas and her brother Willie were standing by.

"Poor little boy," said Violet; "I am sure he would not do any harm with it."

"I am far from sure about it," was Mabel's reply; and again she said, "Cyril, give me the ball."

The presence of witnesses was too much for the child: he dashed the ball away with all his little

strength, and before Mabel could stop him, had run across the green to the door of Mr. Mercer's house. Mabel went quietly after him, just waiting to hear Violet say that Rosie was quite happy, and seemed very well; and that she would bring her home the next day, if they still wished for her.

"Oh yes, if you please, for Christmas;" and, then, with a grave bow to Willie, and a bright smile to Violet, she was gone.

"I think she is wonderfully pretty," was Willie's almost involuntary remark. "Come on with me, Violet, and do a little shopping. I must get that youngster a ball."

Violet always dreaded Willie's shopping; for it was carried on on the principle of credit, and generally ended in her father paying for the presents Willie bestowed.

"Come on to the toy-shop with me, Violet, like a good girl!"

Violet turned to comply, saying, "There is a little shop at the corner of Monk's Court where we can get a ball."

"Oh, nonsense! let us go to London House!"

This was the pretentious name given to a shop stocked with toys and knick-knacks of every description, and which shop was the pride and glory of Chelstone.

Willie Douglas, as Violet had inwardly predicted, did not stop at the big ball coloured in gay divisions of blue, green, and yellow; but went on to a cigarette case for himself,—a set of parlour croquet for his sisters,

—a box of dominoes for the child “whose head he had nearly broken,” he said,—a bouquet-holder for Lucy,—and, at last, an expensive little crimson leather work-case, which he ordered to be tied up separately with the ball and a smartly dressed doll. The master of London House was obsequious and civil to Mr. Douglas’s son ; he knew he was sure of the money from the father, just as he knew he should never see it from Willie himself ; and he rejoiced in the addition thus unexpectedly made to his Christmas bill for Cranstone House.

“Where shall I send these three articles, sir?”

“I will take them,” was the reply. “The others can come up to Cranstone House in the course of the evening.”

“Yes, sir ; certainly, sir. But this will be an awkward parcel, I am afraid. Allow me to send it !”

“No, thank you.”

Then, with his characteristic shifting from himself all trouble in little or in great things, he said to his sister,—

“By-the-bye, Violet, you will carry the ball and the doll, too, I daresay ; give me the other thing.”

Mr. Hills apologized again for the ungainly parcels, and bowed and smiled at his customers as they left the shop.

“Willie,” said Violet, gravely, “who are these things for?”

“For the Hampden children, of course. Come in and let us present them.”

“I—I hardly think, Willie, we know them well

enough to make presents like this to them ; and that work-case with its silver fittings is not suitable for a child."

Willie puffed at his cigar, and laughed, "Not for a child of your age, eh, Violet?"

"If you mean Miss Hampden herself, I am quite, *quite* certain she will not like you to give it to her ; and, indeed, Willie, I shall not go in with you."

For Violet had not failed to notice Mabel's distant recognition of her brother, and felt that in it there was a protest against a touch of familiarity and open admiration in his manner towards her on several occasions.

When they reached No. 8, Monk's Court, Willie told Violet to give him the two parcels, and please herself about coming in ; and, then, as Violet turned away to walk towards home, Willie knocked sharply at the little low door.

"Is Mrs. Hampden at home?" he inquired of the little maid who answered the knock by a speedy appearance ; and the next moment Willie was in the sitting-room where Mrs. Hampden was alone—a large basket of black stockings near her on the table, which she had been endeavouring to mend in a languid way, but had now relapsed into a melancholy inaction.

While Willie and Violet had been at the toy-shop, Ambrose had come home from the Bank ; and Mabel, feeling herself useless with her hand in a sling, had gone out with him, taking little Cyril and Katie, also.

Willie advanced to Mrs. Hampden with his parcels

in his hand. Then he said, in a gay, laughing tone,—

“Mrs. Hampden, I saw a pretty little boy of yours in great trouble about a ball his sister would not let him possess himself of to-day ; I have ventured to bring him one which, if he should happen to fling it in Mrs. Mercer’s face, will not hurt her much ; and here is a doll for the sister of our little friend Rosie.”

He laid the three parcels on the table as he spoke, and said he could not stay, as he had to overtake one of his sisters.

“How very kind of you,” Mrs. Hampden began ; “I am sorry all my children are out. You have been extremely kind to my little Rose, too ; for which I thank you all most sincerely.”

“Oh ! you know, we were bound to try and mend what we had broken. No, I can’t stay, indeed !” as Mrs. Hampden begged him to sit down. But just as he was leaving the room, he said, “There is a third parcel for your eldest daughter, with all good Christmas wishes, you know ;” and then he was gone.

The three parcels lay on the table, all in separate papers, with, “From J. Hills’s Fancy Repository, London House,” printed upon them. When the walkers came in, there was great excitement in the two children’s faces, as they listened to their mother’s pleased account of her guest, and his easy, merry manners—his thorough good temper and kindness. But neither Ambrose nor Mabel looked as pleased as she expected ; and while Katie went into ecstasies over her doll, and Cyril toddled off with his big ball to

show it to Mr. Mercer, Mabel and Ambrose stood by each other's side, while Mabel took from the folds of paper the beautiful little work-case, which had the true Russia leather scent, and which, when opened, displayed all the needful accessories of work, glittering in the light of the candle which Mrs. Hampden had lighted that the children might see their treasures better.

"My dear Mabel, how pretty, how beautiful! I should not have thought there was such a thing to be had in Chelstone. Let me look at it."

Mabel's colour had risen to her cheeks, and her eyes were bright with anything but pleasure. She turned quickly to Ambrose, "What shall I do with it? I don't want it."

"No; I should think not," was the reply. "What right has he to come here and make my sisters presents!"

Mabel took the case out of her brother's hand, calmly refolded it in its papers, and then left the room with it. She saw the little maidservant just leaving the house, on an errand for Mrs. Mercer. Quick as thought she put the parcel into her hands, and said, "Jenny, will you be so kind as to take this to London House;" and, then, Mabel went upstairs, and the work-case was not again referred to.

That evening, as Mrs. Douglas and her daughters were gathered together in the drawing-room, Ellis entered, bending under the weight of a large parcel. Willie was not present, and Lucy springing up to look at the address, reseated herself, saying, "It is for Willie. What can it be?"

Violet knew very well what it was ; but she was playing a game of German Tactics with Rosie in a corner, and did not speak.

"I wonder Ellis did not take it to Willie's room," Constance said ; "but, I suppose, seeing 'From London House' on it, he thought it was our property."

"What can he have been buying?" said Mrs. Douglas anxiously. "It looks like a game of some sort."

At that moment Willie came into the room. "Well!" he said ; "here you are ; I have bought you a set of parlour croquet, fair sisters, on an improved principle. Come and look at it."

Lucy eagerly discussed the merits of the croquet, and Constance admired it ; the paper and string were all strewn about ; and, then, the bouquet-holder and Rosie's box of dominoes were displayed, when a small square parcel made Willie exclaim, "Hullo! what's this?" A note in a thin yellow envelop from Mr. Hills explained that 'the ladies' work-case had been returned; and as Mr. Hills thought there might be some mistake, he sent it up with the rest of Mr. W. Douglas's kind order ; and hoped it would suit, as a party had been inquiring for the article soon after Mr. W. D. left the shop, and the sale had thus been prevented.'

Willie crushed the note up in his hands, and muttering something to himself, carried the parcel over to his mother, saying, "Look, that is just fit for you, mother ; take it, as a present from me, with a Christmas kiss." He spoke in his natural voice ; but Violet, looking at him, saw that he was greatly mortified

and annoyed ; and though she admired Mabel's spirit, she could not help being sorry for her brother.

Mrs. Douglas exclaimed, "Oh, my dear boy ! it is too pretty for me ; it is beautiful. But, my dear boy——" Have you paid for it? was on her lips ; but as he bent over her, she could not utter the words, and only kissed him with more than her accustomed tenderness.

"Where is Charlie?" was Willie's next question.

"He is gone to Chelstone with papa," Constance said. "You know, this is the night of the lecture at the Literary and Scientific Institute ; and papa is taking the chair."

"Poor Charlie ! it is rather too bad to set him to such a penance in the holidays," said Lucy.

"You ought to have gone, too," said Violet, from her corner.

"Thanks, Violet, I don't see the ought at all, to hear a Chelstone genius stumbling through some wretched platitudes, and losing his h's while looking after his wandering ideas—is what I simply can't stand. May I ask why you did not go yourself?"

"Papa said it was too cold for me, or I should have liked to go very much."

"Honour bright, Violet," said Willie. "Come, let us all have a game at croquet ; and you, child, too," turning to Rosie, who was examining with delighted eyes Mrs. Douglas's present. Willie spoke sharply ; and Rosie came to the table to play, putting down the case with a frightened air, as if she had been doing wrong to touch it. The thought crossed Willie Douglas that

the next evening, when she was relating her experiences at Cranstone House, Rosie would not forget to mention this present to his mother. "That detestable prig, her brother, was at the bottom of it, I believe," he said to himself again and again, while he was knocking about the miniature croquet balls with his sisters. "I'll make him repent it some day."

"Dear Violet," said Mrs. Douglas the next morning, "don't you think it would be as well to let Mrs. Bond prepare a basket for the Hampdens, for the child to take home with her; there is a great deal of game in the house; and Mr. Sanderson has sent us a splendid turkey—we had ordered one from Crabbe's farm as usual—and a goose for the servants. What do you say to letting the Hampdens have the smaller turkey and a brace of partridges, and a plum-pudding and mince pies?"

"Dear mamma, it is so kind of you to think of it; but the Hampdens, perhaps, would not quite like it. You see, dearest mother, they are on an equality with us, except in the matter of money; and one feels a delicacy in offering such things to people in their position, unless there is the ground of friendship to go upon."

"I see they are ridiculously proud," said Mrs. Douglas; "not the poor mother herself, but that son and the eldest girl, too. It is a pity when people cannot accommodate themselves to their circumstances."

"But, mamma, if we put ourselves in their position, we should not like to have our Christmas dinner sent us by comparative strangers."

"Very well, Violet, please yourself. I thought you would have liked my proposition."

Violet thought of the Russia leather case, and sighed. "Mamma, game is an universal present," she said at last. "I should like to take a brace of pheasants or a hare, if you will let me."

"Very well, my dear ; do as you think best. We had better take the child home in the brougham. I have some shopping to do in Chelstone ; so I can leave you at Monk's Court with your favourites, and call for you again in an hour."

"Thank you, mamma ; and I may ask Mrs. Bond to give me the pheasants."

"Certainly, darling ; and, Violet, you have quite made up your mind about Hurst Hill, I suppose. There is still time to get you a dress, if you wish for one."

"But I do not wish for one, mamma. I was only seventeen last June, and I don't wish to come out yet, mamma. You know, if I go to Hurst Hill, I must go to other places."

"No ; I scarcely see that, Violet. The Hastings are different. I mean our position with them is not the same as with other people. There is no family with whom we are on quite the same intimate terms, except the Sandersons, and they do not give balls."

"No, indeed," and Violet laughed at the idea of a ball at Redlands. "I have persuaded Lucy and Willie to ride over to call on Mr. and Mrs. Sanderson this afternoon ; for which, I think, I ought to be applauded."

"Yes, darling, and for many other things, too. You have a good deal of thought and consideration for your age." Mrs. Douglas came back, as she was leaving the room, and kissed Violet. "You were right about the Hampdens, Violet. By-the-bye, dear, you were with Willie yesterday when he bought those presents for us all at Hills's. Did he pay for them?"

Violet shook her head. "No, mamma; I am afraid he did not."

Mrs. Douglas looked distressed as she exclaimed, "Oh, Violet! I quite dread the bills this Christmas. That dear boy is so generous and so lavish."

"Mamma, so unscrupulous is the right word. He has no right to spend papa's money as he does, and get into perpetual difficulties."

"My dear, all young men are alike—at least, a great many do the same. Frederick Hastings thinks nothing of giving four hundred pounds for a pair of horses," sighed poor Mrs. Douglas, in the apologetic and pitying tone with which mothers always stand on the defensive for their sons, as she left Violet to answer the maid's summons to see Miss Douglas's dress, which had just come from the milliner who presided over the fashion of Chelstone and its neighbourhood.

Rosie Hampden was quite a person of importance on her return home. When Mr. Douglas's carriage stopped at the door of No. 8, Monk's Court, Mrs. Mercer herself opened it, and lifted Rosie out, with many inquiries for her cut forehead and general health interspersed with assurances that, if she were not more steady, worse misfortunes would happen.

Violet followed the child quietly into the parlour—where she was half-devoured by Katie and Cyril—the brace of pheasants in her hand, and a pretty basket of grapes and flowers, which she put down on Mrs. Hampden's little table, where the basket of stockings still stood, and said, "Our friends have been so good as to send us a great deal of game this Christmas, and mamma thought you would kindly accept some of it." Then, turning to Mabel, she said, "I have brought you some flowers: they are not very grand ones; but the Christmas roses are finer than usual this year."

Who could resist Violet? Mabel found her coldness melting under the sweet influence of that gentle girl. The remembrance of the hateful present of the work-case faded away; and she thanked Violet cordially, for her kind thoughts for them, while she took the flowers out of the basket, touching them with loving fingers, and arranged the beautiful purple grapes, with some leaves, on a china saucer, which ornamented the chimney-piece, set upright in the centre; and thereby announcing that it was to be looked at, but not used.

"My dear Mabel, what will Mrs. Mercer say?"

"She will forgive me, mother; she must forgive me. Look how beautiful——. No, Cyril, you must only have two grapes: now this is the second and last."

The child stood on tip-toe, and opened his rosy lips for the grape; nor did he ask for another after Mabel's decision.

"I must have that jar for the flowers next," said

Mabel ; "but for that, I think, I must ask permission. Miss Douglas, I am so engrossed with my treasures that I am forgetting to ask you to sit down."

"I hope your finger is better," Violet began.

"It is in the fair way to get better now," said Mabel ; "for a piece of needle came out last evening, thanks to Mrs. Mercer's excellent doctoring."

"I trust you find the Mercers kind and attentive ; the old verger himself is quite a part of the Abbey. One finds it hard to think of him anywhere else." And, then, from the verger they went on to talk about the church itself ; and Cyril, hearing the organ mentioned, left off stroking the glossy plumage of the pheasants, and came up to Violet, saying, "I go to church very often with Mr. Mersy, and I know about the monuments and the chapel where Lady Aylmer took sanctuary."

"Why, Cyril !" exclaimed Mabel, laughing, "you will become a little Mr. Mercer in miniature. We shall have to get you a black gown and a rod."

"I've got a black suit," said Cyril, still nestling up to Violet ; "knickerbockers, you see ! it is black because papa is gone away to heaven—and Maudie and Cherry."

And, then, not heeding his mother's sudden gesture of distress, as she hid her face in Rosie's shoulder, who was standing by her, the child began to climb upon Violet's knee, and soon got so merry and boisterous that Mabel had to call him to order, and send him out of the room with Katie to take the pheasants to Mr. Mercer.

"What a lovely child he is!" Violet said. "Will you come with me some day, Miss Hampden, and bring him to see my grandmamma? I should like you to know her; I have often told her about you."

"Thank you!" said Mabel; but the response was not so cordial as Violet hoped. Mrs. Hampden, however, interrupted,—

"Yes, dear Mabel; as Miss Douglas is so kind as to propose it, I hope you will go. She needs a little variety, Miss Douglas, very much; she is apt to sit too closely at her work; and I shall be so grateful to you, if you will take her anywhere."

"Then I will come some morning when I have been to service in the Abbey, and ask you to return to luncheon. Sometimes I walk into Chelstone with papa, and stop at church when he goes on to the Bank. To-morrow will be Christmas-day, and then comes Sunday; so, if Monday should be fine, I will come then; shall I?"

"Thank you!" was Mabel's reply, "unless my finger is quite well; and then I shall be too busy, I am afraid."

"But your finger will not be well," said Mrs. Hampden in a fretful voice; for she was vexed that Mabel did not respond more warmly to Violet's overtures. "You must not touch a needle yet, or you will have a chronic inflammation in the joint, Mrs. Mercer said so."

"Well, dear mother, it is to be hoped, when I do touch a needle again, it will be to better purpose than the other day."

The brougham was now seen stopping at the door, and Violet rose to say good-bye, and at the same moment Ambrose came home from the Bank. His face was clouded, and his manner to Violet chilling and constrained. Even when Rosie sprang into his arms, he did not relax.

"They seem determined not to like me," poor little Violet thought, with something like a pang of disappointed effort, as she seated herself by her mother's side in the brougham. "I am afraid I have not the tact, Grannie says is so necessary in showing little kindnesses ; but I must do what I can."

"Well, Rosie, are you glad to come home?" Ambrose said, when he returned to the sitting-room, after taking Violet to the carriage.

"Yes, very glad ! but very sorry to leave Violet."

"Violet ! You have grown very intimate, Miss Rosie," said her brother. "She is Miss Douglas to you and to all of us."

"Oh, no ! she told me to say Violet," said the child ; "and, Amby, look at the grapes and the flowers ; and there's a beautiful pair of pheasants for dinner to-morrow."

"*Pair of pheasants !*" exclaimed Ambrose, in a tone very unlike that he generally used in speaking to his sisters. "I am sorry to hear it !"

"Sorry ! why, Ambrose ? We had only some roast beef, and not a very big plum-pudding, and no mince pies," said Katie, who now returned with Cyril, some bright feathers from the birds' tails stuck in their hairs.

Ambrose repeated the word, "Yes, sorry. Mother, I don't like taking so many favours from those people. I am Mr. Douglas's paid clerk, and I am much obliged to him for employing me ; but there the obligation must rest."

"Really, Ambrose," Mrs. Hampden began, "I think you are very perverse, and you speak to me as if it were my fault. It is no use, Ambrose, you and Mabel holding your heads so high—we are poor and friendless, orphans and a widow. I am grateful to anyone who is kind to my poor fatherless children. There was no occasion to offend Mr. Douglas yesterday by returning that pretty little present he made to Mabel, which she tells me she did ; and now you are angry about the game ; and you are scarcely civil to that sweet girl. I really think—I do, indeed——" Then came the too frequent burst of tears, and Christmas Eve did not promise to be very cheerful.

But Ambrose and Mabel exerted themselves to raise their mother's spirits ; and when the bells of the Abbey rang out the Christmas peal, the children were all engrossed in playing a game of question and answer, which Ambrose never failed to make amusing. At eight o'clock, he said, he must go back to the Bank ; he had promised to work there two hours for Mr. Dene, who wanted to go to a party with his sisters, and Mr. Evans had a little demurred, because the work at the close of the year was so heavy. Mabel made an excuse to go out of the room with her brother to see, she said, that he tied up his throat well ; and then she began,—

"Ambrose, is anything wrong?"

"No; only what I might expect. Young Douglas was at the Bank this afternoon, and made himself extremely disagreeable to me before young Dene and Mr. Evans. It was rather chafing to my spirit, that is all."

"He did not say anything about that present."

"No; but he talked at me a great deal, and gave himself airs. Then he blundered so awfully in the book he professes to keep that he gave me an extra hour's trouble. But let us forget the whole set, Mabel. Why should we care a straw about them?"

"Ambrose, dear," said Mabel, reaching up to kiss as much of her brother's face as appeared over the red comforter she had just tied round his neck,—
"Ambrose, don't let us forget Christmas peace and goodwill; let us try to think of the great Christmas joy, which nothing can really take from us. Ambrose, let us remember our father's teaching, and try to get hold of it ourselves, and lead the children to it, also."

"You are a woman, Mabel; it is easier for you to bend your neck to the yoke."

"It is easy for everyone who learns of Him who came to us—at this time—" Then, afraid of having said too much, Mabel gave Ambrose a parting kiss, and went back to the sitting-room.

Christmas joy! To how many weary ones do those familiar words sound but as an empty echo of departed happiness. How many sad hearts count over their losses at Christmas-tide, and look round on vacant seats by the fireside, or within on bright hopes withered,

and fair flowers lying faded upon life's track. Continually we hear it said : "We must leave Christmas rejoicings to the children now ; the time for Christmas joy is over for us." It may be so, as far as the merriment of earth is concerned ; but surely we should try to grasp the great gain outweighing every loss which Christmas-tide commemorates. The chimes from every church tower, ringing in the festival first celebrated by angelic voices, first illuminated by the heavenly light, should surely wake in us thoughts of heavenly treasure with which no earthly jewels can for a moment be compared. If our souls were tuned to celestial melodies it would be so ; but, alas ! too many of us are prone to murmur and to mourn in the minor key of discontent and repining, instead of striving to swell the great Catholic anthem of "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, goodwill towards men."

CHAPTER VII.

FIGHTING THE FIRES.

"Who made the heart 'tis He alone
Decidedly can try us ;
He knows each chord, its various tone,
Each spring, its various bias.
Then at the balance, let us be mute
We never can adjust it :
What's *done* we partly may compute,
But know not what's *resisted*."

BURNS.

CHELSTONE had its code of laws on little social points which were unalterable. Certain people must be invited to certain entertainments, and others must be omitted. There were grand houses in the neighbourhood—two or three thinly scattered—where the townspeople never dared to hope for admittance. By the townspeople, I mean the lawyers, the surgeons, and a sprinkling of nondescript folks, who occupied an anomalous position in the little world, but yet felt that the line, which was drawn with such unflinching determination, separated them from dinners in the select circle, and from evening parties, also, except those on a very large scale. There was Sir Lancelot Aylmer at

Holme Chase; there was the Honourable Colonel Spiers at The Oaks; there was Lady Barritone at Lyne Court; there were the Hastings at Hurst Hill: in their houses Chelstone people, commonly speaking, entered not. They heard of the glories of the entertainments from the clerical staff, or from the Douglasses or Pierponts, who were admitted to dull dinners occasionally, and to "At Homes" when the yeomanry were out at Hurstminster, or the Assizes were held there; for, then, some distinguished people—judges, or those following in the train of judges; colonels, or those in the wake of colonels—were brought within reach of Chelstone. Sir Launcelot Aylmer, for instance, had been sheriff of the county for the last year, and he had entertained a great many people; and Colonel Spiers was likely to do the same in virtue of his office in the year now opening. But only a favoured few from Chelstone itself were honoured with invitations to Holme Chase or The Oaks; and the great majority heard only the report of festivities in which they could have no share. Therefore, it may be imagined that, on the attainment of the young squire's majority, the excitement amongst the Chelstone people was considerable, when the cards were issued in defiance of the strictly observed legislation in these matters which 'I have mentioned. "No offence must be given," Frederick Hastings had decreed, as his grandmother demurred now and then at the list, alphabetically arranged, which was made out under his direction.

"Mr. and Mrs. Evans, my darling boy?"

"Yes, decidedly, grandmamma," had been the response; "and the manager and his wife at the other bank, too—the what-do-you-call-it? Provincial something."

"You will find them very provincial people, I expect," remarked one of the Miss Hastings; "but I suppose you must have your own way."

"Of course I must," was said, with a firmness which admitted of no appeal. "And Mr. and Mrs. Douglas, and Miss Douglas, are to have invitations to dinner for the thirty-first."

"I think, dearest child, there will hardly be room for a third in that party; the young people will like to come together to the ball. You forget."

"No, grandmamma, I do not forget; I am quite determined in this case, too," was the answer.

Mrs. Hastings began to feel the reins of government were really slipping from her grasp; and the good-nature and kindliness of the young squire certainly shone forth in his anxious desire that the tenants' and tradespeople's ball should be as good as the other, and that all the poor people who were too sick or too infirm to come to the feast that was prepared for them, too, should have equivalents sent them. But all these discussions about the celebration of Frederick Hastings's twenty-first birthday had taken place a month ago; and now the grand event was very near, and there were preparations making in almost every small house to do honour to the summons sent to attend the ball at the great one. Wonderful were the toilettes of the Chelstone ladies—all aspiring to

look their best, all intent upon their individual appearance eclipsing that of their neighbours. Mrs. Evans pulled out a brocaded silk skirt, which had not seen the light for many years, and had it gored and trimmed with black lace; while she ordered a marvellous wreath of red roses and gold wheat for her head; and felt highly satisfied when it was finally deposited on the summit of her grey curls, which no fashion could induce her to dispense with. It were vain for me to attempt to tell how often the three flies from the Star Hotel, and the sociable and old yellow chariot from the Eagle, passed and repassed the corner of Monk's Court on the night of the 31st of December; nor how many hearts beat anxiously as they sat ready dressed waiting for their turn to come, when one of these lumbering carriages should stop at their door and convey them to Hurst Hill. So, in these last hours of the dying year, the old town was not only awake, but in action; and one thought was prominent in almost every heart—the ball at Hurst Hill. The crowd was assembled by eleven o'clock, and the scene was brilliant; for nothing in the way of illumination or decoration was spared. The mixed multitude of guests differed in no way from other mixed multitudes on similar occasions. There were the great people of the neighbourhood, with their own large parties attached to them, amongst which they danced almost exclusively. There were the Chelstone people, feeling strange and isolated, and not quite as happy as they expected. There were the young and glad, to whom every change from daily

routine was a keen delight, and who were ready to enjoy all things with the relish of youth. There were the timid and uncertain people, who, not sure of themselves, were tormented with doubts about their own behaviour and appearance ; and good Mrs. Evans, when she caught sight of her brocade silk and red wreath in a long mirror, felt a pang of mortified, instead of gratified vanity, as she saw the reflection of a stout elderly lady, with a gown much too short, and a wreath much too high for the fashion. There were, also, the quiet, unobtrusive people, like Mrs. Pierpont, who relapsed into her own corner, saw everything, and noticed everything, and extracted pleasure from it all in her own way ; and was not miserable if Lady Aylmier returned her bow with a blank stare, or Mrs. Spiers sat with her shoulder turned towards her on the same ottoman for half an hour without speaking. Mrs. Pierpont was the wife of Mr. Hastings's family lawyer, a lady by birth, and exercised a gentle influence over her excitable and rather too noisy husband. Mrs. Pierpont thought she had never seen Constance Douglas look so lovely, nor Lucy more thoroughly bright and happy ; and she wondered why Mr. Douglas was so grave, and almost sad, and Mrs. Douglas seemed like a person to whom smiles were an effort. Rumours that Willie Douglas was a great deal of anxiety to his father were, of course, afloat in Chelstone ; but it was hard to believe anything very ill of him ; and so Mrs. Pierpont thought, as he led his mother to a seat near her, and stood by them for a few minutes, talking brightly and pleasantly.

So the hours went on,—the last hours of the old year,—and there was music and dancing, and light jests and gaiety ; and, at midnight, there was a sudden hush, and the bells of the old Abbey were heard from afar ringing their merry peal ; and, then, the host's friends and relations gathered around him, and a birthday greeting was sung, and a birthday salute fired,—and so his twenty-first year was ended !

"This is our waltz," Frederick Hastings said to Constance Douglas, when the music again sounded. "This is our waltz ;" but after one turn he said, "Have you seen the conservatory ?"

Yes, she had seen it ; but the question was put in a way which admitted of no refusal. Constance was standing amongst the flowers and tall hot-house plants the next moment, and in five minutes more she had given herself to the young master of Hurst Hill. Very calmly and deliberately, as she did everything, for she had made up her mind long before, that if the proposal came, she would accept it, and be mistress of that handsome house and all in it.

"I shall have no difficulty in obtaining your father's consent," Frederick said, perhaps, rather more confidently than Constance altogether liked.

"No ; I should think not," she answered. "But how will it be with Mrs. Hastings and your aunts, and Lord Westdowne ?"

"Oh ! my poor, old grandfather never disturbs himself about me or anyone else. As to these people here, they are awfully fond of you, and are sure to be pleased ; and if they were not, it would make no

difference, you know. I have settled long ago that, when I married, they should live at Woodfield—it's a nice little place, just fit for them ; and so you see everything will be smooth."

"Yes," she answered, playing with the flowers of the magnificent bouquet he had sent her for the ball.

"Here come some people," Frederick said. "What a bore ! Take a turn to the end, and let us have a moment's peace behind the orange-trees."

He drew her hand into his arm, and then, with a burst of the real hearty love he had for her, he said,—

"I'll do my best to make you happy ! I will let you have everything that you can wish for ! I will never forget that my best birthday present, when I came of age, was the gift you made me of yourself, Constance !"

"Thanks !" she said softly, in those musical tones which had won so many hearts. "Thanks ! you are very kind and good ! What is that light over Chelstone ?"

They were at the end of the conservatory now, which abutted upon the terrace, and through the glass a lurid glare was distinctly seen.

"I don't know, indeed ; unless it is one of the bon-fires, exceeding due bounds, in my honour," he said carelessly ; and, then, they returned to the ball-room.

"Now, Charlie," said Violet, as the last peal had died away from the Abbey church tower, "I think we had better go to bed ; we have watched the dear old

year lie down and die, and seen the new one rise ; and now I am sleepy, and so glad I am not at Hurst Hill."

"Wait a little longer," said Charlie, who was roasting chestnuts by the schoolroom fire, and sipping some of Mrs. Bond's marvellous orange wine, which she had brought up herself for Violet and Charlie, with some dainty morsel for supper. "Wait a little longer, Violet ; I am not in the least sleepy, and I want to tell you something. It is nothing amiss, Violet, so don't look frightened. You know last holidays there was a fuss about my going to the Eagle with Willie, and watching the billiards ; and about my going to young Jervis's one night, too, while they were playing cards and drinking grog. Well, yesterday afternoon Willie bullied me to come with him to Jervis's again, and chaffed me because I said they were a low set, and I didn't want to go near them ; and, then, he asked me if I wouldn't go out with him on Taffy with the Chelstone harriers on Monday ; but papa hates it so, that I won't do that either. And Willie said I was a 'young humbug,' and that he should not try to associate with me, or be kind to me, but treat me as I deserved, like a baby of Patty's, as I was only fit to be fed with pap ; and a lot more. It's rather too bad, isn't it, now?"

"You dear old Charlie," said Violet, with tears in her blue eyes ; "you are a hero, not a baby. I am so glad. You will never be afraid to say no. Oh, Charlie, Charlie ! I think—I believe, you will be a comfort to us. Charlie, you will try to do what you know is right, and not be led away from it."

Charlie was biting a chestnut, and it was a great effort to the boy's nature to make these confidences, even to his sister ; but he could talk to Violet as to no one else, and he said,—

“Yes, I will try,—I mean to try ; but it is uncommon hard work sometimes. But you see, Violet, I can't forget about Greville, the fellow I told you of at school, who died just after the Michaelmas holidays. He was never afraid to say no, when the fellows were up to larks ; and he was just as good as you are, Violet, though he had more pluck than any of them. He said to me one day, when I asked him why he would not play cards for money, ‘I am a soldier under marching orders, and I must not disobey my captain, Douglas. Mind you stick close to Him, too.’ He never preached ; but he sometimes caught a fellow with a word like that. This was only two days before he was drowned, trying to save that small boy who had fallen into the river. I shall never forget seeing his face as he lay dead, Violet ; and I said to myself I would be a soldier, too, under marching orders ; then when I died, perhaps, I might have that same look on my face, just as if heaven were shining down on it—as if he had heard the words, ‘Well done,’ from his captain. Look here, Violet,”—for Violet had hidden her face,—“I hope this will be a good year that has now begun ; but I know there is only one thing which will keep us straight.”

Oh ! he was right ; there is but one thing, but one ! Only the love of Him who is unseen, but ever present, can keep us, as Charlie said, *straight*.

The elder son of this house had got into a tortuous downward track, and what was to stop him? We hear it said constantly, that young men must have their fling, and then they will settle down quietly, and be entirely different. Who is to answer for this? It is a perilous and slippery road in which Willie Douglas and tens of thousands like him are treading. It is marked by self-will and self-pleasing, by idle indulgence of every taste and desire, by disregard to the feelings of others. It brings a large harvest of aching hearts, and sorrow, and sadness. It often ends in bitter estrangement from all the dear ties of home, from all the tender affections which are as the sweetest flowers on the pathway of life—in separations worse than death. But, alas! we will not go to the root of this matter; we will not recognise the great need of a daily, hourly, dependence on One who is alone sufficient for these things. And the world goes on in its own way, just as the gay throng at Hurst Hill was going on the first morning of this new year. Amongst it, doubtless, were some who bore about within them that which will alone stand us in good stead, when our last old year shall have died out, and, for us individually, time will be no more. But does it not seem wiser to stand quietly, with earnest resolution for the future, on the threshold of a fresh era in our lives, that we may send back thoughts of penitence for that which is past, and send upwards prayers that the coming year may find us nearer to God, as it will surely find us nearer to death.

Violet, strengthening the hold upon her young

brother's heart of serious impression,—Mabel Hampden bracing herself for her duty, and at length sleeping peacefully by Rosie's side, as the last-midnight chime sounded from the Abbey tower: were they not happy? Perhaps, if the word happiness could be defined, which it cannot, it might have been found that these two girls, so differently placed in all outward things, yet had this in common—that they each knew a nearer approach to happiness than the gay dancers at Hurst Hill, most certainly more of peace and thankful joy than did any heart beating under clouds of tulle and tarlatan, or shining folds of satin, green or blue, decorated with beetle's or butterfly's wings.

Violet had given Charlie a long tender kiss, and taken her candle in her hand, when, just as they opened the door of the schoolroom, a loud peal at the hall door startled them.

"I say, who can that be?" said Charlie. "They are not home yet, surely? It is not much more than half-past twelve."

"Who can it be? Perhaps mamma is not well, and has come back early. But Ellis is at Hurst Hill; he would not ring like that. Besides, I did not hear the carriage. There is the bell again;" and with a half-confessed fear that something was wrong, Violet followed Charlie down the wide staircase, Trove pattering behind her.

In the hall, Mrs. Bond and Patty were standing, debating as to who should open the door. "You see, Miss Violet, all the men-servants are up at Hurst

Hill. It may be some dangerous character! I don't fancy opening the door!" said Mrs. Bond.

"Stuff!" said Charlie, himself beginning to draw the bolts, as the bell sounded a third time.

"Lor, Master Charlie, put the chain on for goodness gracious sake!" said a housemaid, who had now appeared on the scene.

"Charlie," said Violet, "I think Trove would bark and growl, if it were any disreputable person. Look at him!"

Trove was sniffing and whining, and giving a little short bark, but not at all an angry one; while old Dandy, who was getting deaf with age, and lazy withal, came waddling out of the back premises with an important air, pushing the swing door open with his paws, and forgetting his wonted animosity to Trove, bustled to the door as Charlie at last unfastened it, and caught the bottom of Ambrose Hampden's trouser in his nearly toothless jaws.

"Is any one here," Ambrose said, walking unceremoniously into the hall, "who can go up to Hurst Hill for Mr. Douglas and Mr. Evans? The Bank house is on fire, and there is no one on the spot. How far is it to Hurst Hill? there is not a moment to lose. I must go back directly, but Mr. Douglas must be summoned."

"I will run up to Hurst Hill! Let me go, Violet!" said Charlie. "It is only a mile to the lodge gate. I will go, Mr. Hampden." Mrs. Bond and Patty began a chorus of exclamations to the effect that Charlie must not go, while Violet stood pale and

trembling, repeating the words: "The Bank on fire! Oh! what will papa do?"

"Don't be afraid," Ambrose said, leaning against the wall by the door, for he was breathless with the speed with which he had come from Chelstone; "I trust no lives are in danger. Mr. and Mrs. Evans are at the ball; but they have a little grandson staying with them."

Then Violet asked, "Is it a very great fire?"

Ambrose replied by going out on the door-step, and pointing down towards the town. The great forked flames rising out of a dull, red glare, was sufficient answer. Violet shrank back, and covered her face.

"It is Turner's, the ironmonger's warehouse behind the Bank, which is blazing so fiercely. The paraffin and oil there burn so tremendously; but they are wetting the gunpowder, and have carried away a barrel already. I must not stop. Now, my boy, that's right!" he said, as Charlie, having impatiently consented to be wrapped up by Patty in a great coat and comforter, was setting off full speed.

"Charlie! Charlie!" Violet called, "take care!"

"All right!" said Charlie; "I will be there in no time! Good-bye, Violet!"

Ambrose lingered yet a moment to say: "If I meet a fly or carriage going up to Hurst Hill, I will tell the coachman to take up your brother. Good-bye! I trust—I think—there will be no great loss, only inconvenience."

Violet held out her hand, and he took it, for a moment, in his—the little cold trembling hand. Then she said, "Remember the child!"

"Yes; I will not forget him."

Then Ambrose was gone, and in an incredibly short time was again in the High Street, where there was confusion and the sound of many voices,—and the lumbering up of the slow fire-engines,—and cries for water, and difficulty in getting it,—and inquiries as to who was in the Bank house, and where were all the clerks, and where was Mr. Douglas.

A narrow lane, or passage, led down from the High Street, on one side of the Bank house, to a block of warehouses, a small dissenting chapel, and two or three cottages. In this lane was the back entrance to the Bank; and here a crowd was collected, simply doing nothing but blocking up the passage, and preventing those who wanted to get round that way from effecting their purpose. Through this throng Ambrose elbowed and pushed his way; and then there was the blazing warehouse straight before him, and the fire was creeping along the roof of the Bank, while a dense column of smoke was issuing out of one of the top windows. The brisk wind which was blowing fanned the flames, and had, indeed, set the Bank on fire by carrying the flakes of burning soot across the road from the combustible material in the warehouse to the roof of the house.

There was a great collection of tradespeople, who were roused from their first sleep by the light which illuminated the sky above, and, as every fresh barrel of oil ignited, showed out all the gables and pointed roofs of the High Street, and the towers of the Abbey, in strong relief.

I say," said Mr. Hills, the master of London House,

who seemed to have his wits about him more than many of the spectators—"I say, this is the odd thing!—there is no one stirring in the Bank house; they must sleep like the dead!"

"Mr. and Mrs. Evans are out," said Ambrose; "but there are two servants, and where can they be? We must force an entrance from the back."

"What will you do with your valuables, young sir?" inquired Mr. Hills.

"They are as secure as iron safes and a strong room can make them," was Ambrose's reply. But he touched a policeman's shoulder, and said, "I am the only person connected with the Bank here. Will you guard the door in St. Ebb's Lane? I must force it open: there is a child in the house, and, for all I know, two servants also."

"A child! why, the old gent hasn't got one!" was the policeman's reply. "But I should say there was other property worth saving. So here goes!"

And the policeman pounded away at the back door, and after repeated efforts it gave way.

"Now, then, look sharp!" said the policeman to Ambrose, "and tell us where the valuables are."

"The strong room is down this passage, I think. If you will stand here while I go upstairs, it will be all right," Ambrose said. And then he went on, and came to the kitchen, where the gas was burning low; and, with her elbows on the table, her head buried in them, Mrs. Evans's younger servant sat fast asleep.

"Now, then," said Ambrose, shaking her by the arm, "the house is on fire! Wake up, and tell me

where the cook is, and in which room your master's grandson sleeps!"

"Oh, dear! oh, dear! what is it? Cook is gone out for an hour or two,—oh! I said I wouldn't tell! Fire! do you say fire? Lor, Mr. Hampden!"—and then she began to scream, and rush frantically towards the door.

"Stop!" said Ambrose, sternly. "Tell me whether little Arthur Evans sleeps at the top of the house?"

"At the very top, in the room over Missis's, next the street! Oh, dear! oh, dear! where is the fire?"

Ambrose strode away up the stairs, and, as he ascended, the smell of burning told him too truly that the whole upper storey was on fire. The roof of the bed-room the servants occupied had already fallen in; but the passage running between it and the front rooms was still clear, though Ambrose was obliged to retreat several times—the smoke almost choked him.

At last he gained the door of the room where he supposed little Arthur to be sleeping. He opened it; but there was no bed in it: it was evidently a lumber room full of boxes. Again he fought his way to a second door, and here, on a small iron bedstead, was the child—a large, heavy boy of six years old, who lay breathing quietly in the dreamless sleep of childhood.

Ambrose knew that not a moment was to be lost: the sound of crackling rafters, and the burning, suffocating heat, proclaimed that the fire was gaining ground rapidly. Ambrose seized the jug of water from the little painted washing-stand, and, dashing some on the face of the boy and on his own, threw a blanket round

the child, lifted him in his arms, and went out into the passage. At that very moment the low ceiling of the landing fell in with a strange, angry crash; and the way to the head of the stairs lay through a mass of smoking timber, from which flames burst out. The child clung with a despairing frightened grasp to Ambrose. He had struggled at first, in his terror and bewilderment; but on Ambrose saying, "Keep quite still, Arthur, and I will take care of you," he made no other attempt to free himself; and Ambrose tried to cross the fiery barrier.

Had he been alone, he could more easily have made his way; but Arthur's stout arms, clinging round his neck, hampered him. Twice he made an effort to get through the smoking mass to the head of the stairs, and twice he was obliged to retreat. The house was old and dry, and burned like tinder. Presently there was a second crash, and Ambrose knew another ceiling had fallen; while the smoke was so thick that he could not see a yard before him. It was quite hopeless to get down the stairs now; and Ambrose turned back into the bed-room, which looked out on High Street, and, opening the window, called for a ladder. Fire-escapes there were none in old Chelstone; and the engines performed their work so badly that the warehouse where the fire originated was now nearly burned down. The lane on one side of the Bank house prevented the fire from spreading in that direction; and, on the other, there was a small low shop, the roof of which was considerably lower than the Bank, and had, as yet, not taken fire. Just as Ambrose reached

the window, and looked down on the crowd below, a carriage came swiftly up, dispersing the people right and left. Mr. Douglas, Mr. Evans, and Charlie stepped out of it; and very soon the presence of a superior mind was recognised and felt.

Mr. Douglas's clear distinct voice was heard above the tumult; and Ambrose heard him say, "Are there any people in the house? Are there any lives in danger?"

Ambrose raised his voice, and shouted, "Yes! I am here, with Mr. Evans's grandson! The back rooms are all burning, and I cannot reach the stairs! Send for a ladder!"

"Yes! send for the ladders!" the crowd shouted; but, though every one proclaimed the order, few really set off to execute it.

Mr. Douglas looked up, and called to Ambrose, "We will get you help, Mr. Hampden! We will get you help!" But he shuddered as he saw, above Ambrose's head, a wreath of flame creeping round to the front; and he felt a thrill of admiration as he saw the slight figure standing so calmly above the uproar with the child in his arms.

On came the fire, and Ambrose, looking back into the room, saw a great light through the threshold of the door, and knew that the flames were coming near. A piece of burning rafter, also, fell before him from the roof, and the heat and smell of fire became intolerable. Poor little Arthur's quick convulsive sobs and gasps grew fainter and fainter, and the grasp of his arms less and less strong.

Again Ambrose shouted, "The ladders! the ladders! the fire is hemming us in here, and we can't stand it long!"

Then there was a fresh movement in the crowd, and Ambrose saw a ladder borne by two men coming to his rescue. The house was not tall: the Bank was on the first floor, on the next the drawing-room, and then the bed-room where Ambrose stood; but when the ladder was set up against the house, it was too short!

"Can some one come up the ladder? and I will let the child down to him by a blanket! It is his only chance! Quick, though, for I can't hold out long!" He felt he was gasping for breath, and a stupid bewildered feeling was creeping over him. He kept his position by the window, holding Arthur, now insensible, in his arms. Suddenly those who looked up from the street saw the figures of Ambrose and the child in a stronger light—the fire had burst into the room, and was blazing fiercely behind them.

"It will be too late!" he shouted. "Make haste!" Then, before Ambrose's eyes, arose other faces than those of the crowd, illuminated as they now were by the lurid glare of the fire: faces of those who loved him, and to whom his life was precious—of his mother and the little fair-haired Cyril, his young sisters and Mabel. He seemed to see his father, too; and before him floated strangely clear memories of his disappointed hopes—of his sad dejected journeys from Oxford, the unsuccessful candidate for the scholarship. Was it years ago? was it only yesterday? It

was all more and more confused, and he felt himself fight for consciousness as a dark figure stood at the top of the ladder, and a voice said,—

“We’ve joined the ladder at the bottom, sir. Look sharp, sir!”

“Take the child,” said Ambrose; “take the child, and leave me.”

The man, a brave fellow, who had been working hard with the engines for an hour past, saw that not a moment was to be lost.

“Yes, give me the child; but I don’t leave you, sir. Come, sir! I say, you’ve been as brave as any hero! Don’t lose heart!”

The man took Arthur from Ambrose’s arms, and then, descending a few steps, waited to see that Ambrose followed. “I have remembered the child,” he murmured. “She told me to save him.” Then there was a prayer for help, a feeble aspiration, which was scarcely more than a sigh, and a half-defined wish that he had a firmer hold upon Him who was ever so close to his sister Mabel; and then he roused himself, and put his foot upon the ladder.

“Come on, sir! come on!” the man said; for very slowly Ambrose descended. “I see how it is; there is scarce life left in him to come down,” the man said again; “and he will be falling off, and coming to his end that way, if we don’t look out.” So he went quickly down the ladder with the child, and committing him to his grandfather’s care, returned as quickly to the figure which was now simply clinging to the ladder, and making no attempt to move. “I

say, young master, you must come on! Here, give me your foot. I'll put it on the next step—that's it; now the other. Put out t'other hand to help you, or we shall be toppling over."

"I can't very well," said Ambrose; "it has got a burn, I think. But leave me alone—it will be all right."

"All right, indeed! Yes! it will be all right, if I leave you here!" for the flames were bending their forked tongues, like so many fiery serpents, from the window against which the ladder rested.

At last, with patience, care, and guidance, Ambrose was safely on his feet again; and loud and hearty cheers broke from the people as he reeled backwards into Mr. Douglas's arms, who had watched anxiously the descent from the ladder.

"You are a brave fellow! Thank God, you are saved! You are not hurt, I hope?"

"No," said Ambrose, struggling to stand without help; "I am not hurt—not much, that is—only confused and half-stified. That good man deserves all the credit of saving us! Is the little boy all right? And now, sir, can anything be done for the house? for the property?"

"Nothing," said Mr. Douglas, "can save the poor old house. They have got a good deal of the furniture out into St. Ebb's Lane, and the portraits Mr. Sanderson values so highly. It will be a great loss, although we are insured, but Mr. Evans's personal property must be replaced. Then there is the difficulty about premises for carrying on the business to-morrow. But you are trembling with cold? Go home,

and set your mother's fears to rest about you. I must stay here to see the end. These fire-engines playing upon a conflagration like this is a mockery. I have ordered that their full force, such as it is, should be directed to the side next Benson's shop ; and I hope the fire will not spread further. It is a great mercy that we had the strong room built only three years ago. Every paper and book we have is safe, as well as all the specie."

Ambrose did not go home : he stayed by Mr. Douglas's side ; and worked away with one hand, helping poor old Mr. Evans to rescue as many of his possessions as was possible. It was curious to hear the old clerk's lamentations, interspersed occasionally with words of thanks to Ambrose for saving the child's life, and angry denunciations of the servant—an old and trusted one—who had chosen this night of all others, to play truant.

"Nothing could have prevented the fire,—I mean the burning of the Bank house," Ambrose said. "We have never yet heard how the fire in the warehouse originated."

"I have heard," said Charlie, who was as full of excitement as it is possible to be, "a man, belonging to Turner's shop, went into the warehouse, about half-past eleven, to get some oil for the bonfire on Beacon Hill. They hadn't got enough tar, and some one thought it would make a jolly blaze. The man dropped the candle out of the lanthorn, and set fire to some straw ; and the whole place blazed up in no time."

About two o'clock, there were fresh arrivals on the scene of action : a carriage drove up with poor Mrs. Evans, in a frenzy of alarm, and Willie Douglas. The fire was then greatly brought under ; and there seemed a hope that it would stop at the drawing-room and Mrs. Evans's bed-room above the Bank, and not descend further.

The warehouse, and cottage behind it, being a smouldering mass of ruins, the whole energies of the Chelstone fire-brigade were now directed to the Bank ; and after the ceiling of the drawing-room had fallen, the fire seemed to have spent itself.

An unwonted group was gathered in the sitting-room over a glass and china shop, which was nearly opposite the Bank, as the Abbey clock struck five. Mrs. Evans sat on a horse-hair sofa, bewailing the injury to some of her possessions, and the total loss of others. The red roses and the gilt wheat-ears nodded above her now dishevelled grey curls, as if in mockery of her distress ; and a large plaid shawl hid the glories of the brocaded silk. Curled up in an arm-chair lay little Arthur Evans, still trembling with the remembrance of that awful wakening from his sleep ; but perfectly unscathed. His grandfather bent over him with loving interest, and said, again and again,—

“Thank God, the boy is saved amidst all our losses. Maria, remember that the child is saved.”

“Well, Robert, of course I remember it ; but it is a pretty thing to be turned out of house and home in the dead of a winter's night, and obliged to take refuge in a tradesman's house.”

Mrs. Evans had grown several inches in her own importance, since she had seen her name on Mrs. Hastings's card.

"I am sure, Mrs. Evans," said the kind-hearted mistress of the great china and glass warehouse of Chelstone, "you are kindly welcome to stay here as long as you please. It's a great trial, no doubt; but Mr. Douglas is not the gentleman to let any one suffer, if he can help it. He has just drove home that young man who saved the life of your little grandchild; and he has been seeing after a poor man who fell off a wall by the warehouse and broke his leg. It has been an awful night to all of us. Such a fire as I never see before, and hope never to see again. But, as I say, that young clerk is deserving of a reward—and he'll get it, too—from the partners. They ain't the sort to let such an act go unnoticed. Now, Mrs. Evans, I have made a nice cup of tea, and I hope you will drink it; and I'll put that child to bed, if you'll allow me; and I think it no sort of trouble—only a duty."

And if the good woman flourished her own trumpet a little too much, she was thoroughly in earnest in her desire to befriend the Evans', though Mrs. Evans did "hold herself so high," as she expressed it to her little maid-servant several times that night.

CHAPTER VIII.

A NEW YEAR OPENS.

"Cry, faint not, climb—the summits slope
Beyond the farthest flights of hope,
Wrapt in dense cloud from base to cope.

Sometimes a little corner shines,
As over rainy mist inclines
A gleaming crag, with belts of pines."
The Two Voices.

THE first day of the New Year was a tiring and exciting one to Mr. Douglas. He was very much worn out, both in body and mind, when at last he opened the little gate of Milton Lodge, and went into his mother's drawing-room. Here he found Charlie and Lucy and, what was more unusual, Willie.

Mrs. Douglas's greeting was more than usually affectionate, and she retained her son's hand in hers as he sat down by her.

"Well, dear Kenneth, have you been able to arrange matters satisfactorily?"

"Yes; the vacant premises of what used to be

Barton's Library will do very well for the present," he answered; "and Mr. Evans is contented to take a lodging a little out of the town, while young Dene is to occupy the two rooms over the shop, into which we have moved some old furniture. We shall have to make a temporary strong room; but, meanwhile, the iron safes and Chubb's locks are tolerable security."

Mr. Douglas leaned back, and seemed disinclined to pursue the subject.

"The village Hampden is quite the hero of the hour," said Willie. "I wonder who has paid for that magniloquent paragraph in the Chelstone journal to-day—'Heroic Conduct:' is not that the heading, Lucy?—just under the long column which announces the utter destruction of the Bank of Messrs. Sanderson and Douglas by fire. That fat-faced boy of old Evans has plagued the clerks pretty well for the last fortnight by coming into the office to beg for string and paper, and to borrow pencils. Really, his would not have been such a very serious loss. It is a pity our heroic friend did not burn his hand in a nobler cause."

"You are bitterly sarcastic, Willie," said Lucy; "but I must confess I rather agree with you about the fuss made concerning the 'Village Hampden.'"

"You are jealous you are not so great and noble as he is," said Charlie, his eyes kindling. "You should have seen him, Lucy, standing at the window."

"My dear boy, do spare us that story! We have had it from Violet second-hand, and from you first-hand, a dozen times to-day," said Lucy. "I daresay

there are others quite as much up to the emergency as your favourite."

"I don't believe it," said Charlie; "not any one of us, I am certain."

"That's a hit at me, Charlie," said Willie; "but you are quite right—fiery furnaces are not in my line."

"I dislike this joking about a very serious matter," said Mr. Douglas, sternly. "If you have all paid grandmamma your visit, you may leave me in peace for a few minutes."

"Yes, come along," said Willie, yawning. "It is no joke to dance half the night, and to stand in a cold wind in the High Street the other half. We will go and take a nap till dinner-time. Now, you little chap, come on."

Charlie disliked the tone in which his elder brother always addressed him now; and he made no sign of following him and Lucy, but stood twisting a ball of his grandmamma's knitting worsted in his hands, without attempting to do as he was told.

"Go home with your brother and sister," was his father's order.

And then Charlie, obeyed, first kissing his grandmother on the forehead, saying, "I hope I have not made that wool in a great tangle," as he let the ball fall into the basket with a number of others.

"Oh no," was grannie's cheerful reply; "it will be good enough to knit your next pair of socks with, you know."

"Now, Kenneth," Mrs. Douglas began, when they were alone, "tell me, will the loss be very great?"

"No," was the answer ; "there will be a new house to build, and perhaps some loss from the removal of the business from a place where it has been carried on for nearly one hundred years. But we can very well afford that—our reserve fund is large enough ; but there is a vast deal of annoyance. Mr. Sanderson is increasingly touchy, and, perhaps, not as equal to the share in the business as he once was. Then," and here Mr. Douglas sighed heavily, "we have neither of us sons to step in and help us. If things were different—if my eldest son were what he ought to be—— But it is no use going over all this—as we sow so we must reap. A firmer hand a few years ago would have saved a great deal of trouble." ↓

"Kenneth, it is no use looking back," his mother said ; "the present is ours, the future is God's, and the past cannot return. My strong impression is, as I ventured to tell your dear wife to-day—my strong impression is, that Willie should be sent away from Chelstone. I expect he is getting daily entangled more and more by second-rate associates and bad companions. Give him a new start,—even let him go to Oxford, if he wishes it."

"My dear mother ! he would spend double or treble the money there or in London. I still hope that a change will come over him, and that he will see it is for his own benefit to settle down at the Bank. The worst part of it is, that he is not wholly straightforward ; and when I pay off one set of debts, and believe he is cleared, I find afterwards that he made a misrepresentation, perhaps, and that a great many

more lie behind. So this year I am going to start on an entirely fresh footing,—I will make Willie a larger allowance, and nothing shall induce me to go beyond it."

"Kenneth, whatever you give him, he ought to work for it."

"I can't make him work," said Mr. Douglas, almost angrily. Then presently he added: "Mother, forgive me, I am harassed and tired; and yet, before the year is another day older, I feel I must have a serious conversation with Willie. Mr. Sanderson is a good deal annoyed about the fire, of course; and said a great many sharp things to poor Evans about his turning into a ball-goer in his old age; and how he and Mrs. Sanderson refused the invitation point-blank to Hurst Hill, and how the Bank house was deserted; and that he ought to see to it that his servants were more trustworthy. After all, Evans suffers more than anyone, although we shall make up the value of the furniture to him. We cannot build a house in a day, and he and his wife are, for the present, houseless and homeless. And now, mother," Mr. Douglas said, "I wish you would come and dine with us; do come!"

"I think not, dear Kenneth,—thank you for wishing to have me; but I have seen you all here to-day; and I had a sleepless night, what with the carriages rolling past to the ball, and what with the red glare over Chelstone, which I knew betokened distress to some people there, though I little dreamed the fire concerned those I loved so dearly. From the account

the children gave me, you have got a very superior clerk in young Hampden. Charlie's story of the rescue of the child brought the tears to my eyes. It was infinitely more telling than the newspaper paragraph, at which Willie and Lucy were laughing."

"No words can express too highly my sense of young Hampden's worth," said Mr. Douglas. "To-day he has been very useful—more useful a great deal than Dene, who was out in the country for a holiday yesterday, and came into High Street this morning to see the Bank house a ruin. I hope to requite Hampden's services; but he is sensitive and proud, and a difficult person to reach. He almost, by his manner, seemed to resent my inquiries for his hand, and stood aloof from all praise."

"They seem an uncommon family, I think," said Mrs. Douglas. "Violet brought the eldest girl to see me one day lately, and a child whose beauty I never saw equalled, I think; and the young lady herself was charming—such a bright sensible face, and so much personal attraction, too. Violet is greatly taken by her."

They went on then to talk of many little things of mutual interest; and when Mr. Douglas rose at last to go, his mother said,—

"Dear Kenneth, will you take a blessing from your old mother for the new year, and for all years to come, when I am gone—where there are no such divisions of a timeless life? Will you take my blessing?"

Mr. Douglas bowed his head, and kneeling on the

footstool at his mother's feet, she repeated the words in which many a yearning heart has found meet expression of its love and tenderness: "The Lord bless thee and keep thee; the Lord make His face to shine upon thee; the Lord lift up His countenance upon thee, and give thee peace."

And when her son had risen, and gone silently out, the peace his mother had called down upon him, seeming to make its influence felt in the depths of his soul, that mother prayed for him, and for his children, as only one who has lived near to God for threescore years and ten can pray. Then, as the firelight flickered on the walls of the pretty little room, and fitful shadows came and went upon the picture of a boy and girl, with a pony and dog and a basket of flowers—the almost universal accessories to portraits of children of that date—Grannie seemed to see no more the stately figure of the grey-haired man already descending the hill of life towards the valley where her own feet were set; but the boy joyous and glad, like his own Charlie, whose song and laughter were the music of her early married life. And, by his side, that other Violet's face and form came from the treasure-house of memory: Violet, whose sweet young life on earth closed under a dark shadow; Violet, who had now so long ago entered the land where shadows have vanished away for ever, with the sorrow and the sighing which beat their ceaseless monotone in answer to the throbs of countless aching hearts on earth. And then from the past, with all its images, Grannie came back to the present; and the cry of her leal and

true maternal heart was the cry which had ascended for her Kenneth for many a long year: "Bring him nearer to Thee, O Father, by any means, and in any way Thou seest best! Bring him nearer to Thee!"

"At last, Kenneth." It was Mrs. Douglas who spoke, as her husband came into his dressing-room to prepare for dinner that evening. She was already dressed in the best taste, as she always was, and in the most appropriate manner; and, as she stood in the doorway leading from the one room to the other, Mr. Douglas thought how young and fair she looked. "The mother of Constance," he said, almost involuntarily, "or rather her elder sister!" Every wife likes—ah, how dearly!—a little word of praise and admiration from her husband; and Mrs. Douglas was by no means insensible to it.

She put her arm into her husband's, and said, "Come and sit down on the sofa in my room—it is about Constance I want to talk to you; there is plenty of time—the dressing bell has not rung; but oh! Kenneth, how tired you look!"

"I dare say I do. You must remember I have been on foot and anxious for a good many hours. Time is telling on me, Mary, far more than upon you. But, now, what is amiss with Consie?"

"Nothing amiss; but I expect you will find a letter about her on your study table. Frederick Hastings proposed to her last night, and she referred him to you. She told me some days ago—about the time that child was thrown down by the runaway horse—

that she believed this was coming, and that she had made up her mind to accept the proposal. Are you not pleased?" Mrs. Douglas continued, anxiously. "Indeed, Kenneth, it is a very good marriage for our eldest child. She will have everything at her command; and it will be such a happy thing for her sisters, and for her brothers too. We have known Frederick Hastings from a little boy; he is so kind-hearted and good-natured—every one says so. I did hope, Kenneth," Mrs. Douglas went on, "you would have thought this a bright spot to dwell upon! Are there any letters in the study?"

"Yes, a heap—many of them are Christmas bills, I dare say. The young squire's letter may be among them, for aught I know. I was too tired to open any when I came in. So Consie is to be the great woman of the family!"

"You will have no objections to make, will you?" Mrs. Douglas asked, anxiously.

"No, as far as I can see at this moment. He is younger than Constance, which I hold to be a disadvantage; and—well, I should have thought she would have wanted a little higher intellectual atmosphere in which to breathe. He won't be able to carry on discussions with her—polemical, political, or otherwise—as poor Watson did. Had it never struck you, Mary, that there was a mutual attraction, then, between Constance and Watson?"

"Oh, a boy and girl fancy; nothing more, dear Kenneth. He is quite poor, and most unsuited to Consie, who needs to have all things pretty and nice

about her. Oh no, that could never have been; nor could we wish it. This is the very thing for Consie; and it will, as I said before, be so very fortunate for her brothers and sisters, that she should be settled so near them in such a good position."

"Mary, my darling"—an unwonted tenderness had crept over Mr. Douglas since he had risen from his mother's feet, with the solemnity of her blessing upon him—"Mary, this is wholly a worldly point of view. There is another from which these things should be looked at: I think we forget that too often."

"Oh yes, I know; but Frederick Hastings is really most moral and irreproachable in his conduct. You know what his grandmother says of him."

"Absurd old woman!" said Mr. Douglas, impatiently. "Ridiculous old woman!" he repeated, as a vision of Mrs. Hastings, in her extravagantly fashionable ball dress, and built up erection of puffs and chignons, floated before his mind's eye, as it had before his bodily one on the previous night; "her opinion goes for nothing; not but what she is right, in the main, about Fred. Well, if the letter does happen to be on the study table, I will call Consie in after dinner. But, Mary, I must speak very seriously to Willie, too."

"Oh! what about Willie again,—pray, pray, do not be harsh to him, Kenneth!"

"Harsh! we have erred in the other direction. He will be twenty next March, is it?"

"Yes, on the 28th," said his mother, with that prompt certainty about the date of her son's birth in

which mothers are always pre-eminent, and fathers as famous for their ignorance.

"Well, I am going to make Willie a larger allowance for the next year ; but mind, I will not advance him another farthing beyond it, Mary. He is not honest with me or with you—he throws away money in the most reckless way ; but worse, he is playing for money with a low set of farmers' sons very often. I have good reason to know it is so, though he shuffles and prevaricates so much that it is exceedingly difficult to get to the bottom of it all : that is the dark part of it. He is not truthful, and when a man loses his sense of truth and honour, why——" Mr. Douglas rose and paced up and down the room, as he had done many times before when discussing this weary subject. "If I could find out that he had any bent or inclination away from Chelstone,—any hearty desire to follow any profession for which the University would fit him,—I would look more hopefully forward ; I would do my best to promote his views ; but no ! to lounge away his time in this neighbourhood—to shoot, and ride, and play, and, sometimes, drink——"

"No, Kenneth," Mrs. Douglas interposed, "not drink."

"I am not so certain," was the reply. "Sometimes drink, I repeat ; and then idle away an hour or two in the Bank, is really all he cares to do."

"And yet he is so affectionate," pleaded the mother ; "and he is so attractive and handsome. Only last night the people who came with the Palace party from Hurstminster noticed both him and Constance ;

and did you not see how he really danced with girls who would not dance with every one?"

"Nonsense," said Mr. Douglas; "don't go off at a tangent to absurdities like that. What has his dancing to do with it? If he goes on as thus, he will not find it so easy to get on in good society. Do talk like a reasonable woman, Mary, and use your influence with the boy! Show him he is going on to his ruin; and do not flatter him with the belief that he is anything but a very great anxiety,—I had almost said a misery,—to both you and me."

Mr. Douglas then went to dress; and his wife sank back on the sofa—all her brightness for the time had vanished—and the conversation closed in a very different strain to that in which it had begun.

Mr. and Mrs. Douglas are not the only husband and wife between whom sharp and angry words are exchanged about the delinquencies of their children. A wilful and self-indulged son brings down upon his family many evils and many miseries; but this is surely not the least—that too often he is the means of calling up a cloud between two loving hearts, and causing dissension and disagreement where once there was only harmony and unity of opinion.

Dinner passed off pleasantly. Lucy's experiences of the ball were very amusing; and she had a graphic way of telling little things which is a gift with some people, and is vainly emulated by others. Constance here and there put in a few words; but she was serenely tolerant of her sister's chatter, and only endorsed her anecdotes now and then by a quiet

remark. Willie was full of conversation also ; and Violet and Charlie were content to sit as listeners : Violet sometimes wondering within herself whether, after all, the great pleasure of a ball was not to sit down afterwards and say sharp things about the people who had been there.

Lucy was very unsparing in her comments sometimes, and had that free and easy way of laying open her neighbour's weak points which is so very common amongst girls in these days.

"Those poor little Miss Brownes, mamma ; did you see them, with their chignons no bigger than sixpences, and a flower stuck here and there, over their heads, as if they were playing hide-and-seek ? They did not dance more than once, and stood by their dear fat old mother in the same corner all the evening. I saw papa charitably talking to Mrs. Browne ; but then he always does look after the poor despised folk. Constance, I heard the little Miss Browne say, ' Miss Douglas is such an uncertain person, I am never sure whether I should shake hands with her or not.' "

"Poor little thing !" was Constance's rejoinder, "I did not know that it was felicity to her to press my white glove, or I would have gratified her."

"And did you see that little wretched curate hopping away with Mrs. Sinclair ? It is too ridiculous his thinking he can dance !"

"Clergymen have no business to dance, according to my old-fashioned notion," said Mr. Douglas. "I respected Mr. Moorhouse for his absence, and was sorry to see Mr. and Mrs. Digby there."

"My dear papa, who ever thinks of Mr. Digby as a clergyman at all? He takes the income from the living; and his curates do his work, while his wife sets the fashions."

"She is an intolerable person," said Willie; "and puts herself into attitudes which might have suited her at eighteen, but do not answer at forty. She has got so fat, too—such a puffed out style."

"Yes, quite a puffin, Willie," laughed Lucy; "there is a happy comparison!"

"I like her," said Violet, from her end of the table; "she is always kind to me."

"Kind! she is sweeter than honey, when she thinks she can fascinate any one. She made a dead set at Willie last night."

"And you, Violet, I dare say, have said pretty things to her about her children or herself; that is the sure way to her heart. No, I forgot; not her heart; she has not got one—a little ossification took place in her left side some years ago."

Violet looked at Constance, and remembered their conversation on the way to Hurst Hill a short time before.

"No one can say her little girls are not pretty, nice children," Violet urged; "the eldest is quite something out of the ordinary run."

"Violet," said her father, "seems to be the only one who is trying to follow the golden rule to-night."

"Yes," said Charlie, "Lucy seems to do nothing but abuse every one. You wouldn't like it yourself, Miss Loo."

"My dear boy, there is nothing I should care less about. Our tongues are our own, and we are free to express our opinions."

"I don't think we ought to use our tongues as if they were our own altogether," said Violet.

"Listen to the oracle," said Lucy: "Violet is what the Scotch would call 'o'er cannie.' The fire, and the village Hampden's heroism, have been the subject of your discourse most of the day, my dear child; and, I think, it is fair that we should have our turn now, and descant on the ball."

"Lucy," said Mr. Douglas, "I dislike soubriquets: it is the third time to-day I have heard you use one. I am sorry neither you nor Willie seem to be able to appreciate true heroism when you see it."

"I don't like nicknames either," said Mrs. Douglas, in her gentle deprecatory manner; "and really that young man did distinguish himself, by all accounts, last night, and he is, also, from what I hear, an excellent son and brother."

Then Mrs. Douglas and her daughters left the dining-room. Mr. Douglas did not linger; but telling Charlie to run away to his sisters, he asked Willie to come into the study. Willie complied, whistling carelessly, and giving the fire a vigorous poke, as he took up his position on the hearth-rug.

Mr. Douglas turned up the lamp on his writing-table, and took up the letters which lay there one by one, to examine them, without speaking. The Hastings' arms, on a dignified-looking red seal, on the thickest of cream-coloured envelopes, made him smile

in spite of himself. He laid the letter on one side, however, and taking the others in his hand, sat down in his arm-chair and opened them one by one.

"Did you want to speak to me?" Willie asked at length, after having struck several matches, and unrolled some little spills with which Violet kept her father supplied.

"Yes," said Mr. Douglas, at last. "Here are a heap of documents which concern you;" and opening one of the deep drawers, he took from it a bundle of letters which were labelled W. I. D. "Most of these," he said, passing his fingers over them, "are applications to me for money which you have already received from me to pay these very bills with, Willie. This is not honest."

"What do you mean, sir?"

"I mean," said Mr. Douglas, "that 'bill delivered' is written on almost all these. They have come in a second time, when last Christmas I gave you a cheque which you said would set you right, and enable you to discharge these debts."

"I did pay a heap of them," said Willie. "There is some mistake."

"I think not. The tradesmen are justly weary of applying to you, and come to me to settle their claims. Listen to your London tailor:—'Having applied to your son, William Innis Douglas, Esq., three times for the favour of his attention to this account——'"

"Impudent rascal!" said Willie, "I have paid him one bill, I am certain—I could take my oath on it."

"Hush!" said Mr. Douglas, sternly. "Make no

false excuses. Here is your London tailor; and here is another from a jeweller for studs and pins, and other trumpery; and from a saddler, for a hunting outfit; and from half a dozen of the Chelstone tradesmen, too. I don't know what you may have paid; but these are unpaid; and, I repeat, you have not acted honestly towards me. Then here is a very disagreeable letter from old Jervis again, implying that you lead a son of his into gaming; and saying that you owe them money for a gun, and something on the exchange of a horse. And here is another from Willis, the horse-dealer, about that vicious horse which nearly brought you into lasting misery by causing the death of a child."

"Pshaw!" said Willie. "My dear father, that is going rather too far."

"I think not. Anyhow Willis says he claims money from you for that horse; and that he holds your written agreement that the horse is your property. You are in his hands evidently, and, unless you wish for public disgrace, the money must be paid. May I ask what you intend to do?"

Willie fidgeted with his chain and all the little baubles hanging at it, and he made one more attempt to speak in an indifferent manner.

"It is very unfortunate, I know," he said, "and I am sorry you are bothered by these fellows; but I don't think you take in how many things men of my age want in these days. The last thirty years have made a great change; you see the allowance I have is really insufficient, and if you knew what others spend, you would not think so hardly of me. You

know you are considered a man of fortune in the neighbourhood, and your eldest son may reasonably wish to take his right position."

"Which means smoking cigars in Willis's back parlour, going out with the Chelstone harriers, and playing billiards and cards with the young Jervises and Smiths, I suppose."

"Well, in this dull hole, one must have something to do; if I go up to London to the Savilles, you don't like it. And I ask you if a man of my age is to be condemned to a jog-trot life, to and from a dingy office, to the end of his days, with no variety, and no amusement? Imagine how different an Oxford career must be."

"You were so famous for your Latin and Greek at Winchester, that I don't wonder you pine for Oxford. Now, remember, if you please, I gave you the choice of going to Oxford and reading, or coming here, and gradually getting into the business of the Bank, where you would naturally succeed me. Your reply was, you hated study, and did not care about Oxford. Listen to me, Willie; I am not the man of boundless wealth you choose to fancy: I have moreover four other children; I must do my duty by them. I will increase your allowance from this day, the first of January, and if you will make me a full statement of your debts, I will pay them once more; but it is for the last time. When I say a thing like this, I mean it. I will never pay them again—not debts like these, contracted by sinful indulgence, and the most culpable neglect of your duty to me and to your mother.

"Now, my boy," he said, kindly, "I have often lost my temper when speaking to you, but I do not think I have done so now. Will you give me an assurance that you will begin afresh with this new year? Time is short, Willie, too short to waste in folly and extravagance. There is a higher and nobler life : sometimes I think we all forget that, in this house, and that troubles and anxieties arise from it. That young clerk, Hampden, understands more about leaving footsteps in the sands of time, than any of us. Now, Willie, give me your hand, and may God bless you, and help you to amend !"

Not since he had been a little boy had his father spoken so kindly to him, and Willie was touched, though even now the feeling that he was relieved from the pressure of debt was uppermost, and a selfish exultation that he should for the future have more money at his command.

"Thank you very much, father ; I will do my best to get on at the Bank, and I will certainly make your handsome allowance sufficient for my needs. I have not many ticks this year, and those I have I will hand over to you. As to the Jervis set, they are beneath contempt, and I will cut them for the future. I promise you, on my honour, father, that I will not forget your kindness."

And then he went away, leaving his bills and his anxiety about them, and I greatly fear his surface-deep penitence, behind him also, and gave himself up for the rest of the evening to help his sisters to arrange the charades for Charlie's juvenile entertainment,

entering into it with all the zeal and gaiety of Charlie himself.

Constance and Lucy shared the same room, but Violet had one to herself on the upper floor, next to what was called the nursery, where Patty still sat and reigned over the cupboards, where she yet treasured the remnants of old toys in memory of days that were past. Violet often brushed her hair at night by Patty's fire, and would then chat to her dear old nurse with the familiarity and openness which becomes natural to us, when we talk to those who have known and loved us from babyhood.

If ever Constance could throw herself without reserve on any one's sympathy it was certainly on Patty's; and to-night, as Violet sat by the fire, drawing the brush slowly through her hair, while Patty was folding up her work, and preparing for bed, Constance came in.

All her rippling brown hair was floating over her shoulders, and, in her bright scarlet dressing-gown, she looked, perhaps, more beautiful than in the ball-dress she had worn the night before.

"Now, Miss Consie, my dear, here's my rocking-chair for you," said Patty; "sit down, and let me brush your hair for once; it's a treat to handle it. I brushed it long before Perkins was born, I was going to say, though I can't puff it out in all those bows and rigmaroles."

"Sit still, nurse dear," said Constance, "I am going to take up my position here at little Violet's feet. I have got some news for you, Patty; I am going to be married!"

"Ah, my dear! I have heard whispers of it," said Patty; "well, the birds must leave the nest, and, darling Miss Consie, I hope you will be happy with the young Squire; a grand lady, and mistress of Hurst Hill—only think."

"Yes, only think," said Constance, "but I shall be quite near you all; it is not like going far away. I shall come in sometimes for a cup of your tea, Patty, in winter afternoons. You see Violet looks very grave about it, and does not quite approve the whole thing: look at her."

Violet was sitting with her elbows on her knees, and her cheeks resting on her small white hands.

"She thinks me very worldly and wicked; she will give me up now, henceforth, and for ever. However, mamma is pleased, and papa is—well, he is pleased in a less degree, and Willie and Lucy sound a pæan over me, and dear old Pat is pleased too, I am sure."

"But you, Miss Consie darling," said Patty; "it is you, not other people, that have to be thought of."

"My dear Patty, I am quite satisfied, and think, as the world goes, I am very fortunate."

Patty was not altogether contented with this speech, but she went back from the present to the past—to reminiscences of Freddie Hastings as a little boy, just Miss Lucy's age, and of her and Miss Consie laughing at him one day because he could not say the letters of the alphabet as they came.

Constance laughed. "Now, Patty, that is too much for my equanimity. With such a compliment to Mr. Hastings' intellectual powers, I must say good

night." She kissed Patty, and received her fervent "God bless you, my dear;" and then, patting Violet on the head, she said, "Good night, little silent woman. You seem to do nothing now but think, and pore over books. You must have a change soon. I heard mamma say she should send you to the Aunties at Malvern in the spring. Good night, quiet Violet."

She went out of the room, and Violet followed her.

"Constance, come into my room for one minute:—kiss me, Consie."

"Twenty times, if you like," was the reply, and Violet held her sister close, and laid her cheek against hers.

"Oh, Constance, no one wishes you greater happiness than I do. Only are you sure—are you sure—you love Frederick Hastings; and do you think it is right to marry any one—I mean to think of marrying—without first asking God to show us what is right?"

"How do you know I have not done so?" said Constance, coldly, and she shrank a little back from her young sister's clinging arms. "I do not think you have any right to judge me; I am older, and somewhat wiser, perhaps, than you are."

"Oh yes, I know that," said Violet, now on the brink of tears. "Only I do think a husband ought to be superior in everything; and if you had married poor Evelyn, it would have been so."

"Opinions differ as well as tastes, Violet. I do not think you would find that proposition generally accepted. A clerk in a Government office is, perhaps, a little below the representative of one of the best

and most honourable families in this neighbourhood in most people's estimation. Good night, dear little Violet."

"I did not mean in those things, Consie. Evelyn Watson is so far above most people in goodness, no one need ask if he were religious—every one who knew him felt it. He was what he seemed—true to God, and true to every one else."

"Violet, I am tired and sleepy—good night once more. Kiss me again; you are a good child," and then Constance left her, after a fervent embrace: but the words of the younger sister lingered in the ears of the elder, who against higher convictions had resolutely chosen the world, and what the world could give her—had calmly and deliberately stifled her best affections, and was about to link herself by the most sacred tie, for life, with one whom she did not even confess to herself that she loved.

Violet's words would keep recurring to her—"true to God, and true to every one else." And then, as she sat by the dying embers of the fire in her room, into which she looked with a dreamy abstracted gaze, the pale thoughtful face of him to whom those words applied would come before her. She had never pledged herself to him by so many words; she had never done more than allow his interest in her to be recognised; but from very early years since they had played together at Redlands, there had been a sort of generally-accepted idea that she could understand him, and enter into all his varied tastes and studies, as no one else could. "True to God, and true to every one

else." Those words would, indeed, apply to him ; but not to her. She was *not* true : she did not seem what she was. Was not the reverse more like the reality ? She often was not what she seemed.

Countless women have done as Constance Douglas did, and to many has it been given, even in the midst of a golden prosperity, to feel that the harvest is not altogether sweet, and to know aching and unsatisfied cravings, which those who keep self in subjection by a Power greater than any earthly arm can never experience.

The faithful woman who is "true to God and true to others," who is lifted out of herself, and lives for those she loves—such an one may be often sorrowful and sad, may go through fiery furnaces and deep and stormy waters ; but in the furnace she will see the form of One like unto the Son of God, and if all His waves and billows go over her, she will yet hear His voice, and feel that He is with her as He says unto her soul, "It is I ; be not afraid."

Ambrose Hampden allowed himself an hour or two in the little parlour at Monk's Court every night after the rest of the family had quitted it. On this first night of the New Year, he was, like Mr. Douglas, tired and worn out ; but his mother's persuasions and entreaties did not avail to send him to bed earlier than his accustomed hour. To satisfy her and Mabel he had gone to Dr. Francis, to have his burned hand properly dressed ; and glad indeed was the old Chelstone chronicle—as some people were wont to call Dr. Francis—thus to have this opportunity of commu-

nicating with the hero of the hour. For what with the *Chelstone Journal*, and what with the tongues of eye-witnesses in the High Street, Ambrose's act of bravery had been fully made known, and the good Chelstone people gave him his meed of praise. Delightful, then, it was to old Dr. Francis to be able to tell Mrs. Sanders, in the Abbey Square, and Miss Kitson, in Grey Friars Gardens, that he had actually applied a certain panacea of his to the "injured cuticle;" and to go over his former attendance on young Hampden's little sister, when she suffered from a slight contusion of the eyebrow, and a shock to the nervous system consequent on the fall. For good old Dr. Francis was behind the etiquette of the modern school, which seals the lips of the professors of medicine so securely that a question as to the health of a dear friend is scarcely tolerated—they having learned, no doubt, that in their profession, more than any other perhaps, "*silence is golden.*"

Ambrose had told his story to his mother and sisters in fullest detail, and now he craved for a little quiet.

So, when the door at last closed on his mother, he felt a sense of relief, and stretching out his length before the fire, fell into musing. Sleep seemed to him impossible. His brain was too busy reproducing the scenes of the last four-and-twenty hours, and he still seemed to hear the crackling of the flames, and to feel the child's arms clinging round him with that despairing grasp;—the child that had so often provoked him during the last fortnight by making raids into the bank, with petitions for string, and

pencils, and old envelopes—between him and that child was now established a sort of sympathy, which was almost an affection, arising from the sense of a danger shared together and a life saved.

His short life of twenty years, which seemed unrolled before him as he stood in the window with the flames making head every moment, again presented itself; and Ambrose asked himself if there was not a want in it. Had the thread snapped then, had he and the child been buried in the burning mass, which fell with a crash just after he had reached the last step of the ladder, how would it have been with him? Was he ready to die? And then, with the unflinching honesty which characterised him, the probe was made, and the answer given. And yet it seemed to him that he had had hard discipline—disappointments how keen, as regarded himself!—and now the grinding, wearing care for those he loved, which was sometimes too much for him to bear. Yes, it had been a heavy yoke, and Ambrose had not gone to the Great Teacher to learn how to bear it. He was doing his utmost to bear it bravely himself; but he did not understand how it might have been lightened—so lightened, by the All-loving Hand, that it would become easy, and not hard any more.

From out of all these thoughts sprang another, which was crushed and thrown back with a gesture as if he were in pain; so that Mabel, who had come noiselessly into the room to warn him that the Abbey clock had struck eleven, said—

"Does your hand hurt you, Ambrose?"

"No. My hand is all right since old Francis tied it up. It has never been half as bad as yours was, I expect. We seem prone to have lame fingers."

"Ah, yes," she said; "but yours was hurt in a noble cause; while mine was so 'provoking and so unheroic—breaking a needle into a joint would not be worth recording in the *Chelstone Journal*. Mrs. Mercer is so charmed with that paragraph, Ambrose: she invested several shillings in copies of the *Journal*, and is going to send them to her friends."

He did not smile, and he looked so tired and haggard, that Mabel said: "You must not sit up any longer, Ambrose. Come, I shall blow the candle out, and demolish the fire."

"I am not a bit sleepy;—stop ten minutes, May."

She leaned over the back of the old leather chair, and kissed his hot forehead; she felt so proud of him, dear, bright, unselfish Mabel; and in her loving, sisterly heart, she longed that he might now stretch out his hand to grasp the comfort of that faith which is as the golden thread, running through the tangled web of life, leading onward to the rest and peace of heaven, where rough places are made smooth.

"It might have been all up with me last night, May."

"Yes," she said, softly. "Thank God, dear, you are safe. What could we have done without you?" and both her arms crept round his neck, as she stooped over him again, and kissed him for the second time.

"Look here, May; one seems to get a glimpse of what death may be, when one has been near it; for, you know, I felt the fire very near, and I had scarcely a breath to draw. Another minute, and I should have fallen back with the boy."

"Yes, I know, dear Ambrose; don't dwell on it any more."

"I want to say one thing, Mabel. I don't believe I was fit to go, but," he said, suddenly rising, "I have felt rather different to-day—not such a bitter contempt for that young Douglas, who certainly has not forgotten to badger me as usual."

Mabel's eye flashed. "You! how dare he?"

"He would do or dare anything of that kind," said Ambrose; "and perhaps I am a good butt for him, as he sees I am chafed by his idiotic folly. But I won't speak of him. He has not annoyed you, I hope, for the last few days?"

"He turned to walk with me and the children on Thursday, but I made myself so disagreeable that I don't think he will try it again; and as we met Mr. and Mrs. Digby, and she insisted on stopping him, I think he was sufficiently punished."

"He shall *not* do that again," said Ambrose. "He had better take care."

"I can take care," said Mabel. "Please don't quarrel with Mr. Douglas; it might lead to his father being displeased with you. I feel quite sure, Ambrose, that there is no need for you to say anything about it. Don't let us talk of it any more."

"No, it is not a pleasant subject." Then he took

his candle from her hand, and, stooping down, kissed his sister. Evidently he wished to say something more, but reserve crept over him, and kept him silent.

The brother and sister ascended the stairs together, and at the top they parted. Mabel, turning into her room, looked back, and saw Ambrose still standing irresolute, and she went up the passage again, and said, almost in a whisper, for fear of waking the sleepers in the house—

“Do you want anything more, Ambrose?”

“No—only, Mabel, don’t you go to early Communion at the Abbey every Sunday?”

“Not every Sunday, because mother sometimes likes to go, and then I stay with the children; but I am going to-morrow morning.”

“Well,” he said, in a low voice, gruff from emotion and shyness, “I think I shall go with you. I am not sure! I must look a little closer into myself first, you know, for it is a good many months since I received the Holy Communion. Not since—since——”

She knew when! Well did she remember the hushed and quiet room, where she had knelt by Ambrose’s side, and well did she recall her father’s dying prayer for him, for then. all.

It was to be answered, it would be answered. In her heart came a great tide of hopeful joy. Ambrose was so dear to her! at last they were to have sympathy in the highest things; but she only laid her hand lovingly on his, and said, “I am so glad! *do* come.”

It was nearly the dawn of the winter morning before Ambrose slept ; but he had reached a turning point in life, and had resolved, by God's grace, to press onwards, under the banner of which "Excelsior" should be the motto. He had at last, as it were, made his choice : now, though the way be rough and wearisome, though hard and yet harder discipline be needed, there is hope for him. For is there not the promise of a conquest over every foe, and a victory won, through Him who once looked with sad and pitying eyes on a young and earnest questioner, who, in the days when He was walking over the rugged paths of earth, came to Him with the burden of his unsatisfied longings, and his half-confessed discontent with his own works and his own goodness? "One thing thou lackest !" One thing ! and who shall say all that lies hid in that one thing ? Happy are those to whom is revealed the riches of that treasure-house, of which our dear Lord Himself is the beginning and the end.

CHAPTER IX.

THE FLOWER FADETH.

"We can but yearn through length of days
For something lost, we fancied ours ;
We'll miss our darling when the spring
Has touch'd the world to flowers.
For thou wast like that dainty month
Which strews the violets at its feet ;
Thy life was slips of golden sun
And silver tear-drops, braided sweet.
For there was light, and there was shade,
And thine were sweet, capricious ways ;
Now lost in purple languor, now
No bird in ripe red summer-days
Was half as wild as thou."

THERE was a whisper of spring in the Hurst Hill plantations ; primroses nestled in starry groups at the roots of the trees, and the fragile wood anemones sprinkled the ground like snowflakes amidst the tangled shrubs and low bushes where Violet Douglas had gathered the branches of the spindle-tree in those winter days when the coming of age of the master of Hurst Hill was the great event in the little world of Chelstone and its neighbourhood.

And that great event had come and gone, and one almost as great had followed, on the May day when the friends and the tenantry were again summoned, to do honour to Frederick Hastings' bride—the bride of whose beauty, and self-possession, and graceful manner, there could be but one opinion.

And time went on, and the old year that we saw ushered in by festivities, and marked by the fire at the Bank, had counted out its measure of months, and weeks, and days, and was, when we again look at the Abbey towers of old Chelstone, amongst the things of the past.

Even in the streets of Chelstone there was a feeling of spring on the bright March afternoon, when Ambrose Hampden comes quickly across the Abbey Square to the door of No. 8, Monk's Court. It is not the time when he generally leaves the Bank, for it is scarcely half-past two ; but he has something in his hand which he thinks will give pleasure to some one in the little parlour—some one about whom he is very anxious—some one who is changed indeed since he carried away the pheasants to Mrs. Mercer, which Violet Douglas brought to do honour to their Christmas board, long ago—some one who lies now, patient and weak, on a little sofa Mrs. Mercer has provided for him, and never cares to move.

In the dark November days of the preceding year little Cyril and his sisters caught the whooping cough ; the complaint ran its wonted course, and all seemed to go well, when one morning, early in February, Cyril, who had nearly lost his cough, over-persuaded

Mabel and his mother to let him go again with Mr. "Mersy" to his dear church.

It was a bright and sunny day, and warm, as February days sometimes are, but the chill and damp within the building laid an icy hand upon the child; and when the service was over, and Mr. Mercer was preparing to lock the doors, he saw his little companion was shivering.

"It is colder here than it used to be, Mersy," he said.

And the old man, who was overjoyed to have his small friend again trotting by his side, struck with sudden fear, hurried him away, and delivered him to his wife's care before he allowed him to go into the parlour where his mother was sitting.

"She'll frighten herself into fits," was Mrs. Mercer's remark, "if she sees him like this. We must warm him through and through first, and give him some elderberry wine; none but an idiot would have taken the child to church on a day like this."

"Why, the air is like new milk, it's so soft," said poor Mr. Mercer.

"Yes, and inside that musty, fusty, kill-damp building, I suppose! Be quiet, Mercer, and don't let's have any more nonsense like that."

For the Abbey, strange to say, was Mrs. Mercer's aversion, as it was her husband's pride and glory. Indeed, so perversely was Mrs. Mercer disposed, that she never frequented it on Sundays, and walked away to a church at the other end of the town, which was, as she said, more to her taste in every way.

The elderberry wine sent the blood to little Cyril's pale cheeks, and he was soon as hot as he had been cold ; but the mischief was done, his cough came back with redoubled violence, and for many days the child lay between life and death, with inflammation of the lungs.

He had pulled through the worst, Dr. Francis said, and now the only thing was to feed him up ; he was weak, and his constitution was delicate : he must have old port wine, beef-tea which was real essence of the meat, and cod-liver oil, cream, fowls, game, indeed anything he could fancy. And Mabel worked away harder than ever ; and Ambrose, and his little sisters, and his tearful anxious mother, did their utmost to deny themselves for their darling's sake.

"I am in great haste, Mabel," Ambrose said, as she met him in the passage, "but here are two or three forced strawberries which Mrs. Evans has had sent her, and the kind old man gave them to me for Cyril. How is he?"

"He is better since he went to sleep after his dinner," Mabel said. "Take him the strawberries yourself, he will be so pleased."

Ambrose went gently into the room, and kneeling down by his little brother's side, said, "Open your mouth and shut your eyes."

How unlike the frolicsome Cyril of old was the reply, as the large blue eyes were languidly turned upon Ambrose's face.

"Tell me what it is, Amby ; I can't play about it, somehow ; I wish I wasn't always tired."

Ambrose held the little saucer covered with green leaves to the child, and lifting up a leaf, said, "Peep, Cyrie!"

The little boy's eyes kindled with the pleasure of a sick child at the sight of an unexpected dainty, and he opened his mouth for a strawberry, saying, "Summer must be coming, and then I shall get well; strawberries come in summer. You must all have one, Amby, and Rose, and Katie, and mamma, and May."

"No, no, Cyril," said Mabel; "there are only a very few, you know; and you must eat them all." And then she held another to the half-open mouth, saying, "A kiss first." The little lips were hot and feverish, and Mabel could scarcely repress a sigh.

She followed her brother into the hall again, saying, "He gets weaker, Ambrose; I fear he does, and we want some more wine so very, very much. There is scarcely more than a glass left, and mother and I have no more money."

"I am afraid I have not much either," was the answer; "but the day when I draw my salary is near. This is the twenty-third of March, is it not?"

"Yes; that leaves a good many days till the first of April, and Dr. Francis says everything depends on nourishment. Oh, Ambrose! why, why are we so poor now, when we want money so sorely? It does not matter when every one is well. I think we *must* get some wine, and let the payment stay till April. There is that work of mine, too—it surely will be paid for soon; but it is the same old story: these grand

ladies are so ready to order, the secretary says, and so slow to pay. *May* I get the wine? May I ask Mrs. Mercer to send for it?"

"No," said Ambrose. "No, Mabel; I dare not begin bills; but I will see what I can do. Don't stop me any longer now, for Dene is away to-day, and Mr. Evans is going over some papers in the private room with Mr. Douglas and Mr. Sanderson. The latter is in a cantankerous mood, I believe, and is likely to keep poor old Evans for hours. I asked young Douglas to stop in the Bank till I returned. Now let me go."

"Well, Hampden," was Willie Douglas's greeting; "your ten minutes has extended to twenty. What have you been at? You have made me late for an appointment, which, perhaps, you will be glad to know."

Ambrose went to his desk, and said, in the restrained voice he always used when he spoke to Willie Douglas, "I am sorry I detained you;" and then he added, "Have you had any customers since I went?"

"What is that to you?" was the answer. "Do you imagine I am incapable of giving change for five pounds or cashing a cheque? I like that!"

Ambrose went on writing the advices in the London banker's letter, and was silent. Willie soon lounged out of the Bank in his usual manner—the new Bank which had risen on the foundation of the old one, and now presented a handsome front to High Street. Mrs. Evans was delighted by its circular windows, which gave her drawing-room a distinguished appear-

ance, and made her the envy of Mrs. Harris at the National Bank, who was condemned to three narrow windows—scarcely more than slits, Mrs. Evans averred—which windows were rather a distinctive feature in old Chelstone houses.

“It is an ill wind that blows nobody good,” Mrs. Harris had said, when she saw Mrs. Evans installed in the handsome roomy house at the corner of St. Ebb’s Lane. “It might answer for other people to get their houses burned down if this was to be the result.”

The Bank itself was now lofty and spacious, and had all the modern improvements in the counter, the desks, and the general furniture.

“You have not wanted me, Hampden,” said Mr. Evans, when he returned, just after Ambrose had closed the doors as the clock struck three. “No one of any importance has been here, I suppose?”

“No,” said Ambrose, absently, and he scarcely heeded what Mr. Evans said, for he was making up his mind to ask the old clerk to lend him five pounds for the great and pressing needs of Cyril’s illness. Nothing but such an extremity could have brought Ambrose to ask this favour, but for Cyril’s sake it must be done. He had only just enough money to pay three months’ rent to the Mercers on the twenty-fifth, and to keep the rest of the family in daily necessities till then. His mother and Mabel administered that part of their little income derived from the few hundred pounds which their father had left to his family, and Mabel had just told him she had none left.

Nothing tells so severely on narrow means as illness, and never is the pang of poverty felt so much as it is when inability to provide for the wants of our beloved ones who are ill stares us in the face. Then it is we are more than ever inclined to take up the question of why our heavenly Father has made so great an inequality in the distribution of this world's goods. Why is it so? And sometimes the fainting and too faithless heart can find no answer; uneasy and dissatisfied, it seeks for rest from doubts and misgivings, but finds none. Ambrose was really so much engrossed with the subject which he found it so difficult to begin with Mr. Evans that he hardly listened to what he said. He called off the sums in the cash-book, with the usual debit and credit, in a dreamy way, and the name of "Humphrey Day, credit 30/-," passed from his lips, with the rest, unnoticed. Then he took the letters to Mr. Douglas for signature, as he always did, having previously copied them, and Mr. Douglas's kind words on trivial subjects, which he now seldom failed to address to Ambrose, met with but little response. Once the thought struck him—would it not be better to confide in Mr. Douglas than in his chief clerk? but old Mr. Sanderson's presence was a barrier, besides, somehow, it would be harder even to speak to him than to Mr. Evans.

"Is the carriage at the Bank door, Hampden?" Mr. Douglas asked. "I am going to the station to meet my youngest daughter by the 3.50 train, and I think it is time I was starting."

Ambrose was fidgetting with a pen on the table,

when Mr. Sanderson said testily, "Can't you speak when you are spoken to, Mr. Hampden? and pray oblige me by not making that scraping noise against the cloth; it annoys me, Mr. Hampden. Perhaps you can tell me if my carriage is come?"

"I did not notice whether it was or not, sir, but I will soon ascertain."

Ambrose went back to the Bank, and looking over the blind, returned with the information that Mr. Douglas's carriage was at the door, but Mr. Sanderson's was not. Whereupon Mr. Sanderson grumbled, and kept up a volley of complaints, of which Mr. Douglas took no notice, and continued to sign his name at the bottom of each letter, with unflinching coolness, handing the blotting case to Ambrose when he had finished, with the words, "It has been rather a heavy day's work for you, Mr. Hampden. I am sorry we had to detain Mr. Evans so long in consultation this afternoon, but these are rather anxious times; the money world is on the eve of one of its great convulsions, I fear."

"Tut, tut," said Mr. Sanderson, "what does a boy like that know about it? It is not like your usual caution to confide in a junior clerk," were the last words Ambrose heard as he closed the door. If he had lingered, he might have caught the rejoinder.

"That junior clerk of ours is not made of common stuff, I assure you, Mr. Sanderson; he has a good deal of the hero in his composition."

"You can't say the same of your son and heir, Douglas; by-the-bye, he comes of age on the 28th.

Well, well, boys must have their fling ; but you'll never make a banker of your son."

"No," said Mr. Douglas, briefly, "perhaps not ; but there has been an improvement—a slight improvement—during the last year. I always regret, Mr. Sanderson, that when we lost your brother, you did not see your way to offer Evelyn Watson a place here, with the prospect of a partnership."

"I did see my way to it, but the fellow refused with a high and mighty air, and betook himself to the Antipodes. But we shall want young blood soon, Douglas ; there is room for a junior partner ; you had better do your best to keep Willie up to the mark. Old names are better than new ones.—There is something amiss with the spring of this chair ; I never was quite satisfied with the pattern," he said, as he pulled himself with great difficulty out of the depths of an arm-chair, covered with green leather ; the ditto of which stood at the opposite side of the table, and was supposed to be the partners' especial property.

And then Mr. Douglas, in haste to meet Violet, left Mr. Sanderson fretting and fuming about the chair, and interspersing his grumbling with sundry short ejaculations to the effect that every bank in the kingdom was tottering, and that they must look sharp, or there would be breakers ahead for them too.

"I am going to ask a favour of you, Mr. Evans," said Ambrose, just as the cashier was about to lock the money in a small iron box, before taking it into the strong-room. "It is—I mean—" he said, hesitating ; "I feel very unwilling to ask it, but——"

Mr. Evans was tired and cross, because Mr. Dene was absent, and he had a good deal more work in consequence ; and cross because Mr. Sanderson had worried him about several business matters, till he felt like a mouse in a cat's paw, as he expressed it ; and thus his temper was not the most serene at this moment.

"Favour ! ah, a holiday, I suppose, gadding off to-morrow to the country to a wedding, as Dene has done to-day ; you must really not expect me, Mr. Hampden, to be always at your beck and call. Why, sir, when I was a junior clerk, holidays were unknown, except on Christmas Day and Good Friday. This shirking of work is a feature of the times—quite a feature of the times——" and the cash box was closed with a sharp bang, while at the same moment Mrs. Evans put her head in at the Bank door, and said—

"James, how much longer am I to wait? You said you would be ready to pay some calls with me to-day."

"Calls, indeed !" was the answer ; "I am much too worn out for calls ; with the clerks gadding here and there just as they please, I am tired of it."

Mrs. Evans had advanced into the Bank now, and coming up to the counter said—

"You seem very much put out, James ; you need not take me up so short ; I can pay my visits alone, as I *always* do—only there is the new curate to call on, and the young doctor's bride, and those new people who have come to the Abbey Lodge."

"Stuff and nonsense, Maria, I am not going to call

on them—folks with a handle to their names, indeed ; you have put on your grand bonnet for nothing, I am afraid."

Mrs. Evans looked unutterable things, and then said to Ambrose—

"I hope your little brother liked the strawberries ; it was but two or three sent me by a friend, who has forcing-houses, which are quite celebrated."

So they were in their way, but Mrs. Evans did not add that the friend sent the produce to Covent Garden, and sold it at such prices that it was a very profitable concern for him.

"Thank you," said Ambrose. "The strawberries pleased Cyril very much. It was very good of you to think of him."

"How is he, Mr. Hampden?"

"I don't think he is much stronger yet," was the answer ; "but we hope much from the coming warm weather, when he can get out."

"Arthur is always asking about Cyril, his father says, in his letters ; and he doesn't forget you either, Mr. Hampden. He will be coming here for the Midsummer holidays, though I am sure the very sight of the child will remind me of that dreadful night, and—what we owe you."

Ambrose did not smile or make any response, but taking the heap of letters in his hand, he said—

"Is there anything else I can do, sir, when I have posted the letters?"

"No, no, thank you, Hampden ;" and as the young clerk was leaving the office, he called after

him—"Hampden! after all, I did not hear what the favour was."

But Ambrose did not hear, or at any rate did not answer, and then the Bank door closed on him.

Ambrose walked slowly homeward, passing the post-office on the way, and putting his letters into the box. He was saying to himself that, after all, it was well not to be indebted to old Evans even for a week; it might seem as if he had repented his decision when he had so steadily refused the little token of gratitude in the shape of a five-pound note, which Mr. Evans and his son had tendered him after the fire. He could not be paid, he had said, for doing merely what any one would have done in like circumstances; he could not accept money for a plain act of common humanity. So the really grateful father and grandfather of little Arthur Evans had to content themselves with giving Ambrose a gorgeously-bound copy of Byron's Works, with a long inscription, written in copper-plate, on the fly-leaf, which Ambrose, when he asked Mabel to cover the book, cleverly slipped out of observation under the edge of brown holland!

All this passed through Ambrose's mind, and he felt it was better to take some of the money saved for the rent, and throw himself on the Mercers' kindness than to borrow of Mr. Evans.

When he had posted the letters, Ambrose went to the wine merchant's, and ordered two bottles of the best port wine Chelstone possessed to be sent to Monk's Court. He was very particular in asking

for the best wine ; and when he turned away from the counter, he saw Willie Douglas was standing behind him with one of his friends.

"I did not know, Hampden, you were such an epicure about your port," he said, with a sneering laugh. "It is a pity you can't taste the wine at Redlands. I say, it is early days to be nice about your wine."

He knew he was provoking, almost insulting ; but there is nothing more irritating to a vain man than to feel himself repulsed by those he considers so infinitely beneath him as Willie considered the Hampdens to be.

And Willie Douglas had been so decidedly repulsed in all his overtures to Mabel, which he still thought was more her brother's fault than hers, that a bitterness akin to hatred had sprung up towards him, gathering strength as time went on.

Even now it was not pleasant to hear his friend laugh, as Ambrose quietly walked out of the shop without a word, but with a look which expressed the contempt he felt.

"I say, Douglas, that was no go," he said ; "he wouldn't catch fire, eh?" and then his companion's laugh was provokingly reflected on the face of the wine merchant's clerk, though he tried to repress it, and stepped forward to receive Willie's order in an obsequious manner.

There was a night when I spoke of a strong conflict that went on in Ambrose's soul when he was choosing which master he would serve.

I do not say in all these months he had always

fought well, or fought his best, against the foe within and the enemy without. But I do say that through all he was in *earnest* now, and that this very day he struggled hard against his dislike to Willie Douglas, and did not nurse and indulge his natural feelings of contempt and indignation as once he might have done.

Well it was for Ambrose that he had thus made for himself a Refuge in time of trouble, and had an Anchor to hold by in a storm, for a problem more difficult to solve than any that had yet grown out of his life was soon to present itself; and hard, very hard it will be for Faith to find the answer, and say it *shall* be well.

It would not be easy to say which felt the happier, Violet Douglas or her father, as they drove off from the station together.

"You look so blooming, Violet," he said. "You are grown, I think, and expanded. The air of the Isle of Wight must have suited you well."

"Oh yes," she answered; "and I have been quite as happy as I ever can be away from home, and away from you," she added, giving the hand she held a loving little squeeze. "Aunt Isabella is very kind, and the children are dear little things. But, though Bonchurch is so beautiful, nothing is prettier than Chelstone in my eyes. How grand the dear old Abbey looks, and how pretty the Hurst Hill plantations are, with just that faint blush of green on some of the trees! And how is every one, papa? and how has everything got on?"

"Without you, you mean—is that it?"

"No, indeed," she replied, laughing. "I am not so conceited as to think I am the mainspring of the watch."

"Well," he rejoined, "we have not been standing still exactly. Our lady of Hurst Hill looks very fair and flourishing, and the little heir is a prodigy, of course. A red lump of mortality he seems to me. But then, I am no judge of babies. I see a great many trappings and satin shawls and cloaks."

"Papa! satin cloaks? And how disrespectful you are to your first grandchild! Papa, I can't allow you to talk so of—what is it?—Frederick Umfraville Douglas Hastings. You are to be very proud of him, you know. And how are dear Grannie, and mamma, and Lucy, and Patty, and Trove, and Willie?"

"I think Willie is going on better, Violet; that is to say, I have had no money claims made on me of late; but then I cannot be sure, you know, what may turn up any day. You have been told what we are to do on the 28th?"

"Yes, I am glad no very grand party, and that Lent so effectually prevents it."

"No; there is to be only a dinner at the Bank on the 27th, and at home, in a quiet way, on the 28th."

"And the Hampdens, papa? I suppose the children have lost the whooping cough, and I shall be able to go and see Mabel again? Why I was not allowed to go near them I can't think, for I had the whooping cough when I was a baby. Patty is quite sure of it,

and mamma too. However, all fear of infection is over now."

"I believe the little boy's cough is returned," said Mr. Douglas; "we must make inquiries before you run any risk, Violet."

And at this point in the conversation the carriage turned in at the gates, and in another moment Violet was at home, after more than three months' absence.

There was much to say and much to hear that evening, and Lucy, as usual, took upon herself to give an epitome of news, while Mrs. Douglas was content to sit quietly, and look at Violet, feeling glad to have her at home again, and pleased in her secret heart to see her looking what now might really be called pretty and attractive, even by the most fastidious critics.

Willie joined the party in the dining-room directly after dinner, and Violet, as she looked up into his face, wondered within herself if, as her father said, there was really an improvement. She thought she had never seen him so restless, and so strange in his manner. He walked up and down the long drawing-room, whistling snatches of airs from the operas, then he opened the piano and drummed a little, then he came to the fire, and throwing himself into a chair pulled Trove's ear, who was privileged to sit at his young mistress's feet, in honour of her return, till his suppressed squeals made Violet remonstrate.

"Oh, Willie! leave poor Trove in peace."

"Yes, wretched little beast," said Lucy: "he is a specimen of the triumph of mind over matter. I have positively got proud of him since you have been away,

Violet ; haven't I, Trove?" and she took the dog on her knee, and tying her handkerchief on his head, put him through a variety of antics, which sent her mother into fits of laughing, and made Violet exclaim—

"Oh, Lucy, did you tease him, and hurt him, to make him perform like that?"

"No, it was all effected by bribery : sugared morsels have a wonderful power over quadrupeds, as well as bipeds, and really it is a relief to get something ugly to look at in these days, when we are called upon to admire so many beautiful things from babies upwards."

"Is Constance's baby pretty, mamma?" Violet asked.

"Yes, dear, very pretty," said Mrs. Douglas. "A sweet little creature!"

"Now, mother mine," said Lucy, "is that quite the fact?—or, rather, how can we tell whether it is or not? The morsel of humanity which peeps out of magnificent robes, and cloaks, and embroidered shawls, is lost. I shall have to borrow Patty's strongest spectacles to find the face at all on the day of the christening. I am to be one godmother, Violet, as you already know, and Lady Barritone, who does not care a pin for all the babies in the world, another; and old Lord Westdowne, who is paralysed and tied in his chair, sends a proxy in the shape of the Honourable Albert Sussex; and the Bishop is to be fetched up from Hurstminster to officiate; and Freddie's dear friend, his eldest son, is to be another godfather. Now have I not taken you by surprise, Violet? Confess that Easter Monday will be a day of days."

"You never told me all this in your letters, Lucy; you are a very bad correspondent."

"I could not tell you what I did not know. The programme of the baptism was only made out to-day; was it, mamma?"

"No, and I hope Consie won't overtax her powers by all these guests; she looks very far from strong."

"Are Mrs. Hastings and Harriet and Fanny still abroad?"

"Oh yes; but they will return in time for the great event, I believe, unless they change their minds."

"Lucy, did you ever go and see the Hampdens when I was away?"

"I went two or three times, but I was not very warmly received,—in short, we got the cold shoulder; didn't we, Willie?"

Violet saw a dark shadow pass over her brother's face as he answered—

"Pray don't begin to discuss those people, Violet: we have had a little respite from that hobby since you were away. When is Aunt Isabella going to London?"

"In Easter week, I think, if little Agnes keeps as well as she now is; but she has been so strong at Bonchurch, and has quite lost her cough; so that Aunt Isabella will stay there as long as she possibly can."

"Oh, I am going to London to-morrow," he said carelessly, "for a day or two. I thought I would have looked the Savilles up, that is all."

"To London, Willie! you were there only last week," said his mother, "and you know the 28th is very near. Have you told your father?"

"No, I did not know that it was necessary. I am not going to the North Pole; but I shall tell him to-morrow morning, I suppose, when I bid him good-bye, and beg to be excused from the Bank for eight-and-forty hours. Come and sing, Lucy," he said; "deliver that dog over to its rightful owner, and leave Violet, and mamma, and my father to enjoy themselves. I hear my father coming from the study."

Willie sang song after song till Lucy was tired of playing the accompaniments, and begged for a respite; but Willie kept her at the piano, and kept out of his father's neighbourhood as much as possible. Then, refusing any tea, he said he had a headache, and taking a candle from a side table, he whispered to Lucy that he should go to bed. He waved his hand and said good night, but did not take an individual leave of any one.

"He is not well," his mother said, as he left the room. "I am sure Willie is not well. I think I must follow him." She did so, and reached his door just as he was closing it. "Can I get you anything, dearest Willie?" she said, laying a loving hand upon his arm—"anything for your head, I mean?"

"No, thanks," he replied, abruptly; and then, seeing his mother's tender anxious face, he put his arm round her and kissed her, and laid his cheek against hers.

"My dear boy, I am sure you are not well," she urged: "tell me, Willie."

A great tide of remorse and a vain regret for the

vanished days of childhood, when he was free from the load of guilt and sin that weighed him down now, swept over him, and for a moment he did not speak. Then, raising his head, he said in his accustomed voice, "These neuralgic headaches are a great bore. By-the-bye, mother, you can tell papa I am going to London to-morrow. I think if I wake in time I shall start by the early mail train. Good-night, and good-bye."

Mrs. Douglas left him with a foreboding that she could not explain to herself; and on her return to the drawing-room, she sat in an abstracted way, listening to her husband and his daughters as they talked cheerfully and merrily.

When Lucy and Violet were gone, Mrs. Douglas said—

"Willie is going to London again to-morrow, Kenneth; he asked me to tell you."

"To London! there is something wrong, I am afraid. Mary, I have no real confidence in Willie."

"He has gone on so much better lately, Kenneth," she pleaded. "You said so the other day; he has not asked you for any more money for a long time."

"It would have been useless," was the answer. "He knows me well enough to know that, I think. Well, I trust Charlie will be very different to his elder brother: God grant it! As I have said again and again to you, I have no faith in Willie; he is not straightforward and open."

Mrs. Douglas sighed, and her husband relapsed into silence.

CHAPTER X.

THE DISCIPLINE OF LIFE.

"Since in a land not barren, still,
Because Thou dost Thy grace distil,
My lot is fallen, blest be Thy will.
Blest be Thy dew, and blest Thy frost,
And happy I, to be so crost
And cured with crosses at Thy cost."

HENRY VAUGHAN.

"I AM going to walk into Chelstone with you, papa," Violet said, the next morning; "and after church, I must go and see the Hampdens. Patty says that dear little Cyril is very ill, and Dr. Francis does not think he will live."

Violet was dressed and ready to set out, while Lucy and her mother were still lingering over breakfast, reading their letters, and exchanging the news they contained.

"Violet, you must not go to the Hampdens," said her mother, looking up. "People often catch the whooping-cough twice, and I am by no means sure you have had it; besides, my dear Violet, you must go up to Hurst Hill, and see Consie and the baby; and there is Grannie, too."

"I know it, mamma ; I shall have plenty of time for all. There cannot be any infection to fear now—it is quite absurd : the little Hampdens had the cough last October, and this is March. Mamma, it is too absurd !"

"Do not be wilful, Violet," said Mrs. Douglas. "You know how careful you ought to be to run no risk of a cough. You know, as well as I do, your chest is not strong."

Violet coloured rosy red, and she said impatiently, "Lucy has been to the Hampdens once or twice. Why should I be more likely to catch the cough than she is ?"

"I hope you will catch a more civil greeting than I did—that's all," said Lucy. "The truth is, the Hampdens are as poor as the proverbial church mice, and as proud as the traditional peacock. Leave them alone, Violet."

Mr. Douglas, who had left the room when Violet entered it, now called her, saying he was ready to start.

Violet still lingered. "Mamma, if Dr. Francis says there is no fear of infection, you will not mind my going to see that poor little boy ? I can ask the old doctor before church ; and if I make haste, I shall find him before he goes out on his first round."

"Well, if your father allows it, I suppose you must have your own way," Mrs. Douglas said ; "but remember, unless you see Dr. Francis, you act against my will and judgment, Violet, if you enter the Hampdens' house."

Violet felt she was standing out for her own way more than was right; and had an uncomfortable sense that she was obstinate: but now she was so well and strong, it was tiresome to be thwarted just as if she were still a delicate child who could not take care of herself. Indeed, these continual restrictions, which were enforced by her mother, had been a great trial to Violet before she left home. And there was, perhaps, also the inconsistency which may often be noticed in many mothers besides Mrs. Douglas.

To go to a ball in a thin low evening dress,—to pay visits in hot rooms, when the people who had to be visited were worth knowing and cultivating,—to fulfil an engagement which her mother thought of importance, on a questionable day, when the wind was east, or rain threatened to fall,—Violet told herself the path was always made smooth for these; but to visit the poor in their own homes was absolutely forbidden her, while continual obstacles were thrown in the way of her going to church, or even to pay some little attention to people like the Hampdens; and her health was always made the ground of the objection. A great many girls are tried in the same way as Violet was; and the only remedy is patience and a continual effort to see the Hand of God in little disappointments and vexations, which then assume a very different aspect, and, if turned to good account, are as steps to help those who bear them in the right way to advance by their means in the upward and onward path.

Violet was greatly relieved to meet old Dr. Francis on the way to Chelstone. Her father was hastily passing on, afraid of being detained by a long string of questions, and details of the health of Chelstone generally, when Violet said,—

“Papa, please ask Dr. Francis about the whooping cough.”

“What whooping cough?” Mr. Douglas said; for many more pressing subjects were in his mind just then.

“About little Cyril Hampden, papa; and whether I may go to see him.”

“Oh! you are kindly interested in that little fellow, Miss Douglas. Ah! it is something worse than whooping cough now, I am afraid: the child has pulmonary symptoms, and a great deal of febrile action. The only chance for him is change of air, when the weather admits of it, and plenty of stimulating nourishment; but I expect the circumstances of that family are very narrow—very narrow indeed. No; there is no fear of infection, Miss Violet. Allow me to compliment you on your appearance—you are looking remarkably well.”

Mr. Douglas had already walked on, and Violet hastened to rejoin him.

“Why will that old man use such frightfully long words?” said Mr. Douglas: “pulmonary symptoms and febrile action, indeed! I wish he would speak the Queen’s English without such a strong spice of medical terms. Poor old man! he means well, however.”

“There is no fear of infection, papa,” said Violet;

so I may go and see the child. I think I can be of some comfort to poor Mabel ; and you would not wish to prevent me, dear papa—I who can do so little for any one.”

“No, darling ; I would not prevent you from anything you can do without danger to your health : but remember not to stay too long in the room with the child, and not to overheat yourself.”

They parted at the door of the Abbey ; and Mr. Mercer's bow to Violet, as he showed her to a stall, was very respectful. After service he waited for her at the west door, and said,—

“I am happy to see you returned, Miss. Allow me to say that the little angel in our house is,—lor ! I don't know how to say it ; for that child is just like one of my own, that he is, bless him,—but he is booked, Miss ; he is booked !”

“What do you mean, Mr. Mercer ?” Violet asked, surprised.

“I mean, Miss, that child will soon be up along with the angels that he used to talk so pretty to me about, and say, ‘Mersy, I shall hear the angels sing one day, and so will you.’ Lor !” said the poor old verger, wiping his tearful eyes with a corner of his rusty black gown ; “it makes my heart ache, though, to see him lying there fast sinking away. But he is booked for a better world ; and who is to say it ain't best and right, for there is little enough for 'em all ? and if it weren't for my wife, there would be less still. Many is the little thing my wife throws in on the sly ; for she has a kind heart, though she may be a bit

sharp with her tongue. Good morning, Miss ; perhaps you'll look in at No. 9, and see the poor lamb ; he was always mightily fond of you."

Violet was thus prepared for what she found when she at last entered the Hampdens' little parlour. Yet not wholly prepared ; for "as things seen are mightier than things heard," it needed a strong effort not to give way when she saw the little weary invalid lying on the couch in the corner, and heard the short hurried breathing as he put two tiny thin arms round her neck, and said,—

"I am glad you are come back ; and summer is coming, too. I had some strawberries yesterday."

The little girls were gone out with Mrs. Hampden, and Mabel was with Cyril.

"You only wrote to me twice, Mabel," Violet said, reproachfully. "The last time I heard from you, you said the children were all getting better."

"Cyril got cold about the middle of February," said Mabel. "I have been so very full of work of every kind since then, that I had no time to write. I mean," she said, correcting herself with her wonted honesty, "that was one reason why I did not write."

Cyril was lying with earnest eyes, listening to what passed between his sister and Violet.

"I wish I had known," Violet said ; "I wish——" But Mabel interrupted her, and said,—

"Cyril, show Miss Douglas what Mr. Moorhouse brought you this morning."

"Such a pretty picture : this dear little boy is Samuel, you know. Isn't it pretty?" he said ; "and

such a pretty frame." He held the familiar photograph towards Violet, and then he said, in a simple childish way, "You are very pretty, too, and what a nice bit of a bird that is in your hat ; it looks so soft and white."

Violet took off her hat, and let him stroke the grebe's wing ; and then she began to tell him about the sea, and about Bonchurch, and how the beautiful white sea-gulls floated over it and built their nests in the Culver Cliffs.

"I should like to see the sea. Is it very, very big?—bigger than the great lake where Amby took me once last summer, when he had a holiday? I wonder if I shall *ever, ever* see it ; and if I shall ever, ever get well !"

Mabel had re-seated herself at her work—that work which was more than ever important now ; and Violet sat by Cyril, and told him of everything which she could think of to amuse him.

A crimson spot, on either cheek, grew deeper and deeper as he listened, holding Violet's hand tight, and occasionally stroking her cheek and her hair, or the soft white feather which pleased him so much.

Presently Mabel said,—

"It is time for you to have your egg and wine now, darling ; and I think, please, Violet, he must not talk any more. I will go and get the egg."

"Not egg and wine," the poor little invalid said, fretfully ; "I am so *tired* of it. I like the fizzy wine best—the black wine is nasty."

"You shall have some more fizzy wine, perhaps,

Cyrie; but not just now. Ah! here is Mrs. Mercer with your luncheon."

"Mrs. Mersy," said the child, "I don't *want it*."

"Oh, highty tighty, that you do! Good morning, Miss Violet; I am pleased to see you back in Chelstone again. Now, you will let Miss Violet see, dear, how you can eat and drink. There's a fresh sponge cake; and here is something quite delicious in this glass. I shall drink it myself, if you don't make haste. Now, shall I feed you? There's a pretty fellow! I knew you could, if you tried," as Cyril languidly opened his lips and took a spoonful, turning away his head with a gesture of dislike when he had tasted the eggs and wine.

"Perhaps I had better go now," said Violet; "and I will come and see you again to-morrow, darling," she said, stooping over Cyril to kiss him. "I hope I have not done him harm by talking too much," she continued, as the child broke out into sobs and tears.

"No, no," said Mrs. Mercer; "but we will leave him to sister now, Miss Douglas. He is so weak; that's how it is; he can bear nothing."

Violet bade Mabel good-bye, and wished she had returned her loving embrace more warmly. But Mabel's whole attention was now directed to her poor little brother, and she seemed to have no thought for anything else.

When they were in the passage, Mrs. Mercer said,—

"Step into my parlour, Miss Violet, a moment; I want to speak to you, if you please."

"I am so shocked to see that dear child," Violet began, with trembling lips.

"Ah! I thought you would be—I knew you would be. The dear lamb is very ill, very ill; but, as I say to Mercer fifty times a day, children *do* fight through wonderful, and there's no knowing but what he may get well. I am sure, I'd let him racket about from morning till night, and never grudge the destruction of the furniture, if I could only see him well again. But, Miss Douglas, it is about his sister I want to speak to you. She is slaving and working herself to death—up most nights, and eating no more than would keep a fly. No, no more does Mr. Ambrose neither. As to the poor Missis, she sits and cries, and takes on; and the little girls—well, they are but children, and we can't expect young shoulders to have wise heads on them. But I think there is such a thing as being too self-sacrificing, and I don't hold with all the weight falling on one back—and she fit to be a princess, as far as looks go; and," said Mrs. Mercer, significantly, "there's *others* that think with me, or I am much mistaken."

Violet understood the insinuation perfectly, and was vexed with herself for showing that she did so, by the colour mounting to her cheeks. She merely said, however,—

"What does Dr. Francis order for the little boy, Mrs. Mercer?"

"Essence of beef, for one thing. I don't mind telling you, Miss Violet, there's many a pound of beef I have thrown in of late on the sly; and glasses

of wine, too. Well, there, I shall never be the poorer; for, you see, these sort of folks—gentlefolks, I may truly call them—don't like to have things given to them right out. So I take the money for the rent of the rooms, which they scrape and pinch to have ready every three months, and then I make it up in other ways."

"How kind and good of you!" said Violet; and she thought with self-reproach how often she had considered Mrs. Mercer a sharp, cross-grained woman, without any kindly feeling in her, who henpecked her husband, and was fidgety and particular about her lodgings, making mountains out of mole-hills, if there was a spot on a carpet or a dirty finger-mark on a wall.

Violet had yet to learn what depths of tender feelings often lie under exteriors like Mrs. Mercer's; and she did not know how a child like Cyril, even in the days of health—and how much more in the days of sickness and pain—could call them to the surface, and send them flowing forth in streams of kindness and considerate acts of charity and love.

"Mrs. Mercer," Violet said, "I must help a little. I will talk to papa, and to grandmamma; and then I will consult with you. Miss Hampden looks so thin and worn out—it is really too sad."

And as Violet walked homewards, she could think of nothing but what she had seen: the dying child,—for something told her Cyril was fast fading away,—and the pale face of his uncomplaining sister, who bore the burden of the whole household, and

never murmured or thought of herself in the matter at all.

She felt almost indignant when, half way up the Hurst Hill road, she met Rosie and Katie dancing along in front of their mother, the glow of health on their cheeks, and their eyes bright and sparkling ; while even Mrs. Hampden was infected by her little girls' good spirits, and, perhaps, refreshed by the bright spring morning ; she also seemed to Violet to be looking much younger and better than when she had left Chelstone in December.

But the moment Violet mentioned Cyril, the poor mother's face clouded over, and tears filled her eyes ; then, saying she must hasten home to him, she passed on without entering into any particulars about him.

But Rosie and Katie lingered.

"We have lost the whooping-cough now," Rosie said ; "you won't be afraid to come and see us ; and may we come and see you and Trove one day ?"

"Oh yes," said Violet ; "I shall come very often now ; and I will take you home to luncheon one day, soon ; but you had better run after your mamma. Good-bye !"

The two children skipped away ; and Violet, looking back to watch them, saw them join their mother, and knew by their eager gestures they were telling her what she had said.

It seemed almost unfeeling of them to be so merry, she thought, when their little brother, who used to run about with them, was so ill. But the heart of childhood is all mirth, and it is the blessed ordinance

of unerring wisdom, that the sorrows of childhood, like their joys, are fleeting.

There was yet time before luncheon for a visit to Grannie, and the meeting was a joyful one. There were so many family details to go over: the birth of the baby at Hurst Hill was the principal one.

"I am longing to see it," Grannie said; "and as the day is so fine, I am even meditating a visit to Hurst Hill. I daresay you will come too, Violet; and we can be introduced at the same time to the baby—my first great grandchild, and your first nephew."

"Oh, that will be delightful!" Violet said. "I am sure we can have the brougham; and I will call for you at three o'clock, Grannie. And now I am going to tell you about the poor Hampdens. Has Mabel never been to see you all these weeks?"

"She came twice, dear; and the little girls have brought back books which I have lent them; but, dear Violet, Miss Hampden's second visit was so unfortunate that I do not wonder she did not repeat it. Your brother Willie was here, and I saw at once how it was. Willie's attentions were too marked to be pleasant; and the more annoyed the poor girl seemed, the more nonsense he talked. I had another visitor, Miss Salter, who, you know, always engrosses me with her stories of the poor people; and I could not interpose as I wished. When, at last, Miss Hampden rose to take leave of me, to my great vexation Willie followed her and her little sisters, and, I fear, walked down the road with them. I was so bold as to speak to Willie about it the next time I saw him, and I told

him what I thought. He took it, as he takes everything, with a laugh and a professed indifference, and was more than usually agreeable to me ; but the way he spoke of Miss Hampden grieved me. She was only the junior clerk's sister, at the Bank, he said : what did it signify ? as if that could make ungentlemanly conduct excusable."

"Oh, Grannie ! that is just like Willie ; it does make me feel so indignant ; and now I can account for Mabel's coldness to me this morning : she is afraid to have anything to do with us, and no wonder. She looks so pale, and so thin, and so worn out ; it is really most intolerable of Willie ! I think papa must be told about it."

"No, I think it is better to let it alone ; remonstrance with Willie is useless, or, perhaps, worse than useless : it might even make him more determined. Now, tell me about the Hampdens."

Violet did so ; and then Grannie said she would think about the best way of volunteering help to them, and of Violet's plan of taking Rose and Katie to teach every morning, thus relieving Mabel of some of her burden.

"I think that would be an excellent plan, darling, if your father and mother approved of it, and if you think it would not tie you too much, or interfere with home duties."

"I don't think it could do that, dear Grannie. I am supposed to be reading and practising every morning ; and if I taught these children, it would seem like a little tiny bit of real work. I am so

strong and well now ; and there are books and a schoolroom all ready, where we should be no disturbance to any one."

"It is a very bright thought, darling," Grannie said again, "and if any objections are raised, I will do my best to advocate your cause ; but the question of the wine, and other nourishment for the dear little boy, is another thing. It is so much more difficult to offer help of that sort : we must try to find out the right way. I must be quiet now, till my early dinner, to prepare myself for my visit. Before you go, dearest, ring for Martha, and tell her she must have my walking things laid out for my drive at three o'clock."

"I should like to go and see Martha myself, Grannie ; and I shall tell her to get out your very best black silk dress and bonnet, and the large velvet cloak."

"Ah, Violet, your dear father superseded the velvet cloak on New Year's Day by giving me a beautiful seal's skin coat, which is only far too good for me ; but as it can never be worn out, it will be useful to some one, I trust, when I want it no longer."

The visit to Hurst Hill was not so wholly satisfactory as Violet had hoped : the room was full of visitors when they arrived ; and Violet did not like to see Grannie allowed to sit unnoticed while the baby was displayed to Lady Barritone and Mrs. Spiers, and the great-grandmother had to wait her turn.

At last Violet took the baby out of the magnificent nurse's arms, and carried it, in its grand Valenciennes lace robe and embroidered shawl, to Grannie, the nurse

exclaiming, "Please to take care of the dear little 'ead, Miss Douglas;" and Constance said sharply, "What are you going to do, Violet?" But Violet bore off her prize, and succeeded in depositing baby safely on his great-grandmother's lap. Mrs. Douglas kissed the little soft cheek with a murmured blessing, and baby lay content, with open eyes, staring up into the dear old face bending over it.

At last the room was cleared of the grand people, and Constance came up to Mrs. Douglas, saying, "Well, Grannie, is he a satisfactory great-grandchild? I am quite sorry so many people were here when you came; but as Lady Barritone is going to be godmother, I was obliged to talk over the baptism with her."

"There was no haste, dear," said Grannie; "I am delighted with this little scion of a new generation. May he be a comfort to you and your husband, and serve God in his day with loyal heart service!"

Then the young father came into the room, proud and pleased with his child, and too honest to conceal it. He had a frank pleasant manner, and was always kind to his wife's relations, and gave them a welcome to Hurst Hill. He gave Mrs. Douglas his arm, when she rose to take leave, and asked her if she would not like to see the conservatory, and he cut a little bunch of ferns and flowers for her as they passed through it, saying he thought his boy was lucky to have two great-grandmothers: which was an honour few boys could boast.

Constance followed with Violet—the train of her

pretty foulard morning dress sweeping the ground as she moved along—asking Violet questions about the Isle of Wight, and her aunt and cousins, with whom she had been staying. Constance had chosen her own path, and had really everything she had longed for and coveted. To all outward appearance, what could be smoother than the current of her life ; but was she happy ?

Violet did not think her sister's face was as serene in its expression as it ought to be ; and there were tell-tale lines about the pretty curved mouth, and a ring in the silvery toned voice, which betrayed a certain amount of dissatisfaction ; and as if, now the desire had been granted, the young mistress of Hurst Hill had not found it was the tree of life.

As they were going out of the conservatory on the terrace, Frederick Hastings turned round,—

“You must say good-bye here, Consie ; you have no hat, and, you know, you have a cold.”

“I did not know it,” she said, indifferently ; and then she went on with what she was saying to Violet.

“Good-bye, Consie dear,” said Violet ; “you will come to luncheon to-morrow ?”

“Yes ; but I am coming round to the carriage now.”

“No, don't, Consie ; the wind is cold, though the sun is so bright ; and, besides, Frederick said you were not to come.”

Frederick and Mrs. Douglas were a little in advance ; but they now turned. Constance stepped out on the terrace, and said to her husband,—

“How did you get on as a magistrate to-day ? It

must have been edifying to hear you sentence some little boys for stealing turnips."

"Oh, I got on all right! I am the youngest magistrate on the bench. Your father was sitting, too, and will tell you how I distinguished myself."

They were all standing together now; and Frederick, as Constance walked on, stepped on her gown, and a serious fracture was the result.

"Hallo! I beg your pardon, Consie. What an awful nuisance these trains are! I don't know how I did that, however; all your dresses are made of rotten stuff."

"As you are continually tearing my gowns, and all stuff seems equally rotten in your eyes, it does not much signify; but you are excessively awkward. There is another carriage coming round, I think; so I must retreat into the conservatory again, and get my unlucky gown pinned up before I can see any one."

Then she was gone, and left behind her the uncomfortable impression on those who listened, that she asserted herself to her husband, and let no one doubt for a moment, that she considered herself as his superior. She spoke to him as she might have spoken to her school-boy brother; and this habit, when once established, is not likely to be overcome, as years go on.

Could every woman know how all her grace, and dignity, and personal attraction, are lost, when she forgets her right position, and her duty as a wife, I think there would be less of this fault than there is

amongst us. That the wife should be in subjection, is an old, old law ; and, like others from the same unerring code, cannot be broken with impunity. Beautiful and fair alone is she, who looks well to her words, and takes to heart the apostolic command that she reverence her husband.

CHAPTER XI.

THE LITTLE CLOUD RISES.

"But the apparently confused, bewildering present, so close to us that it shuts out all that lies beyond it, is not really confused. God has a meaning and a purpose in it, though we cannot discover it."—*From "Passing Thoughts."* MISS SEWELL.

THE days lengthened, and the sweet spring-time called back the song of birds to the woods, the blossoms to the hawthorn, and the golden cowslips to the fields around Chelstone ; but it did not bring new life to the little fading flower over whom Violet watched day by day with a depth of interest and tenderness which won Mabel's heart.

She obtained the longed-for permission from her father and mother, and taught the two little girls daily in the old schoolroom at Cranstone House, and returned with them after luncheon ; never flagging in her deeds of kindness, never giving way to impatience when, the first novelty over, Rosie and Katie became like all children—a little wayward and wilful, perhaps, and disinclined to settle quietly to their lessons ; preferring a game with Trove, or to ransack the book-

shelves for the stories which the Douglasses had read in their childish days, or to run about the pretty flower garden with Charlie, when he was at home for the Easter holidays.

Rosie was far easier to manage than Katie ; but both little girls learned at last that, sweet and gentle as Violet was, she must be obeyed ; and that, like their own sister Mabel, she meant what she said.

Sometimes, when Ambrose came in from the Bank, he would find Violet with his little brother, and she would tell him she had sent Mabel and his mother out for the air they so greatly needed, and that she was keeping guard.

One day, the last of April, it happened that Cyril had fallen asleep holding Violet's hand in his, and when Ambrose opened the door she held up a finger to him to warn him not to make a noise.

"He is much the same as he has been for some days now," Ambrose said, looking down upon the child. "Do you not think so?"

"Yes," Violet answered ; "but I think he is weaker altogether."

"I do not know," Ambrose said, in a voice which betrayed his emotion, "how we are ever to repay you for all you have done?"

"I do not want any payment," she said, looking up at him with a smile. "If the case could be reversed, Mabel would do the same for us ; and, after all, it is nothing."

"Nothing !" he repeated ; "it is so much that, except from you, we could not have accepted such

kindness ; as it is, it is almost more than I—than we know how to receive. Of course, I know how very much greater is your goodness to us than you would have us think ; but I can only say—God bless you for it all. If the child's life could have been saved by such means, you have provided everything for him."

"It is not I," said Violet. "Papa told me to let Cyril have all that was necessary. I have nothing of my own, you know, except my time, and I have been only too glad to occupy that for some good purpose. I find teaching so pleasant ; I think if all things fail," she continued, with a smile, "I shall be a governess."

He did not answer ; but stood looking down upon his brother, and upon her who was sitting by him.

Monk's Court was very quiet and still—carriages seldom passed, and of street noises there were none. Through the open window—for the day was warm, and the child panted for air—came the sound of the jack-daws, holding a subdued consultation, as they gathered together on the pinnacles of the west of the Abbey front. More distant was the cawing of some rooks in a group of elm-trees on the Hurst Hill Road ; and now and then a pair of doves, which an old lady in the Abbey Square kept with a variety of other pets, cooed over their newly-fledged nestlings. Never again will Ambrose hear those sounds without recalling this spring afternoon in Monk's Court—never again. There came to his soul, then, with full force—that which for many months he had struggled to keep

down and repress; and it came in the solemn presence of one who was soon to cross the barrier which divides things mortal and seen from those which are immortal and unseen. The silence was unbroken for a few minutes. Violet's eyes were upon Cyril, and her hand fast locked in the little wasted fingers which were once so plump and rosy. Then the Abbey clock chimed three-quarters to four, and Cyril opened his eyes.

"Mabel!"

"Yes, darling."▲

"I want to go to church once more with Mr. Mersy; may I?" Then, seeing Violet, he said, "Where are all the others?"

"Mabel is gone out for a walk, and Rosie and Katie are gone with her, and your mamma. They will soon come back."

"There's Amby," said the child. "Amby, please let me go to church once more; for I don't somehow think I am going to get well; am I?"

Violet bent her head, and there was no answer—only the plaintive cooing of the doves—only the faint sounds borne in upon the soft breeze of the April day.

"I hope Rosie will make me a tisty-tosty," Cyril said. "The cowslips smell so nice, though I can't throw the ball: I like a ball. Say me a pretty verse, Violet, please, about the flowers and the land that is far away!"

Violet saw how exhausted the little boy was on awaking from his sleep, and said,—

"I must go and ask Mrs. Mercer to bring your tea first, dear."

"No, no ; I am not hungry : the hymn first. And, Amby, listen—it's about the bright land, you know, where mamma and Mabel say, Cherry and Maudie are gone, and papa too."

As Violet repeated the simple verses, the child's eyes were fixed on her face with a wistful, eager, longing gaze :—

"Every morning the red sun
Rises warm and bright ;
But the evening cometh on
And the dark cold night.
There's a bright land far away
Where 'tis never-ending day.

"Every spring the sweet young flowers
Open bright and gay ;
Till the chilly autumn hours
Wither them away.
There is a land we have not seen
Where the trees are always green.

"Little birds sing songs of praise
All the summer long ;
But in colder, shorter days
They forget their song.
There is a place where angels sing
Ceaseless praises to their King.

"Christ, our Lord, is ever near
Those who follow Him ;
But we cannot see Him here,
For our eyes are dim.
There is a most happy place
Where men always see His face.

"Who shall go to that bright land?
All who love the right;
Holy children there shall stand
In their robes of white;
For that heaven, so bright and blest,
Is our everlasting rest."

"Everlasting rest!" repeated the child. "What means everlasting? I think I should like to go where the holy children stand, for I am very tired here—very tired!"

The great blue eyes closed again, and Violet rising, said,—

"I must really get him his tea now. Mabel always gives him something when he wakes."

She rose to leave the room, and Ambrose, silent and unwilling as it were to break the spell, was left alone with Cyril.

The closing of the door made Cyril open his eyes again.

"Is she gone, Amby? I love her! don't you?"

Poor Ambrose! there was only one answer to that question, but even little Cyril must not hear it. Not yet! not yet! Perhaps the time might come when he need not be ashamed for all the world to hear it; but there are many steps to take in the journey of life before he could hope to attain that to which he was half-unconsciously aspiring.

"Not yet, not yet!" his heart repeated, as he took Violet's place by the little brother who was so dear to him, and held the tiny hand in his, and stroked the long fair curls with womanly gentleness.

In another moment the little girls had returned with a basket full of cowslips, bringing the fragrance of spring to the sick child ; and Mrs. Hampden and Mabel followed with sprays of hawthorn and some waving tassels of laburnum, which a kindly-hearted woman in a cottage garden had given Rosie, hearing her say as she passed,—

“ I wish we could have some ‘golden chain’ for Cyril !”

Then Violet brought his tea ; but leaving Mabel to give it to Cyril, she said she must hasten home ; it was getting late.

Ambrose followed her to the door, and opened it to let her pass out. Something in the pressure of his hand, and the expression of his earnest eyes, told his secret ; and Violet, looking up into his face, saw it written there.

Ambrose was scarcely more than a boy in age ; but constant care for others, and continual forgetfulness of self, with daily resolute bracing of himself to the duty which lay before him, had left their traces on his lip and brow. He looked far older than his years ; and there were all the indications of stedfastness of purpose and strength of will in every line and feature. Who would dare to wish a man a different lot, when the result of discipline was such as we have seen in Ambrose Hampden ?

Mabel, looking back to the disappointed candidate for the scholarship, who had walked with her over the barren moors around their old home chafing, restless, and dissatisfied, unable to rouse himself to exertion

in any other line than the particular one on which he had set his heart—Mabel, who had entered into all his troubles with her true sisterly heart—Mabel rejoiced now, and said often to herself, and sometimes to her mother, how Ambrose had flourished and, as she expressed it, “grown up into manhood” since he had had so much weight upon him, in his care for them, and had given his energies to his business in the Bank with all the fervour which once had been directed to Latin and Greek in his father’s study.

“Yes,” Mrs. Hampden would reply, “it may be all very true, Mabel; but I cannot forget what his dear father’s hopes for him once were, nor how different we both thought his life would be.”

And then Mrs. Hampden would go over all the details of the disappointment, and of the varied trials and bitter losses which had followed close upon it. And Mabel would listen patiently; and though she confessed that there were many problems in her brother’s—yes, and in her own life too—which were hard to read aright, still her stedfast soul did not waver, and she held fast by the anchor of faith; while again and again she would quiet any transient misgiving or doubt by the words which her father had spoken on his death-bed: “Now—now we see through a glass darkly, but one day we shall see face to face.”

As Violet turned out of Monk’s Court, she met her father, as she expected; for it was his accustomed time for returning from the Bank, and he more frequently walked home than rode now.

"Well, little one," he said, as Violet put her hand within his arm, "have you been to see the poor child?"

"Yes, papa, and I don't think little Cyril can live many days; it seems so strange to think of death on a bright spring day like this."

"Yes," he replied, sadly; "but there are worse griefs than death. I have had a great many trying letters to-day. Willie's majority has disclosed several painful things: he has been paying what he is pleased to call debts of honour for the last year, and the tradespeople are left in the lurch, I find. It must be stopped, or I shall be ruined. This year is likely to be a bad one for all bankers: there were several more failures announced yesterday. We can't tell how we may come off even now. As Willie is of age, I am not bound to discharge any but debts for necessary things; but I cannot let the tradesmen suffer. My name must not be disgraced,—I mean not more than I can help. But, child, I ought not to tell you so much of this; you are very young to be disturbed by such miserable details. It comes the harder, because I really did think that the boy was doing better. It is useless to think of Willie remaining at home; and I think that it will break the parting for your poor mother if he does not return. He is now anxious 'to cut the whole thing,' as he says, in a letter I had to-day, and I shall go up to London to-morrow, and see what can be arranged; but I shall not allow him to return to Chelstone."

"Oh, papa! and where will he go?"

"I have thought of a relation of your mother's at

Petersburg, with whom we have had occasional intercourse. He is a merchant in a very large business; and, if Willie really desires to reform, he may have a better chance there, in his uncle's office, than he ever could have here. But it seems hopeless almost to look for any amendment now. I shall break my resolution to your poor mother by degrees, Violet; help me to nerve her for what is inevitable—Willie cannot return here."

Just at this moment a handsome carriage rolled past Mr. Douglas and Violet; and Constance, leaning forward, kissed her hand and smiled, sinking back again with her peculiar self-satisfied manner.

"The prosperous member of our family," her father said, somewhat sadly, as he looked back at the carriage. "Poor Consie!"

"She would not like to hear you put 'poor' before her name, papa: she is so perfectly satisfied—at least," Violet added, correcting herself, "she wishes to leave that impression upon us."

"Hers does look, certainly, a very prosperous lot: so different to that of many of her own age, who live a life of perpetual toil and effort, and who know nothing of the things in which Constance finds her enjoyment."

"Oh, papa! life is a great puzzle."

"And if it is to you at eighteen, little Violet, how much more to me with my half-century of years; but there will be a clearance of the clouds from before our eyes at last. Your Aunt Violet—my only sister—said to me, when she was dying, 'There will be a

morning without a cloud ; and now with me, at evening time, it is light.' "

"I don't know exactly what Aunt Violet's story was, papa. Grannie never can talk much about her as she was, she says ; but she likes to think and speak of her as she is. What was her sad story, papa ? "

Mr. Douglas pressed the little hand close which rested on his arm, and said,—

"She loved a man who was utterly worthless, and in whom we were all deceived till the very eve of her marriage. She was saved from being irrevocably bound to him ; but she could not breast the storm. She died of what is commonly called a broken heart—that is to say, her health gave way, and she drooped like a lily with a broken stem. I loved her very much ; you bear her name, little Violet, and I pray God yours may be a very different fate."

Violet did not answer, and father and daughter walked home together in silence.

Another week had gone by, and Mr. Douglas had seen his son depart for a distant country with a sense of relief ; for Willie did seem penitent, and really thankful to be helped to free himself from companions and entanglements which had caught his unwary feet as in a net.

To his father's great surprise, he did not at all combat his wishes that he should not return to Chelstone ; but was, on the contrary, apparently glad to be spared the pain of parting with his mother and sisters.

Petersburg was not so far but that he could come

home at no very distant date, he said ; and he eagerly accepted introductions to English residents in Petersburg, and talked cheerfully of all he meant to achieve there.

Mr. Douglas thought sometimes there was an undue excitement and restlessness about him, and felt the same doubt now, as on many former occasions, that after all his son had not been perfectly honest or open with him. Nor had he !

As the "good-bye" was finally said, and Willie looked the last on his father's fine face, where care and sorrow had so unmistakeably left their traces,—and saw him struggling to bid him a cheerful "God speed !" and felt how he had wronged him,—he had almost opened the door of the railway carriage again, that he might take his father aside, and even, at this last moment, tell him all. But no, it was but a natural impulse, and all higher principles had so long been dormant within him, that Willie had indeed no power of himself to help himself.

"When years have gone by," he thought,—“when I am thoroughly established at Petersburg,—when I have made my fortune as a merchant, then I can tell everything. There is no object in making a clean breast of it now ; it would only bring more bother and trouble, and show me out in such colours that——”

At this point of his unworthy reasoning the train began to move. Mr. Douglas and his son's hands were once more clasped, and in another moment they had parted, it might be for years, and the father

left the bustling station with a heavy heart ; while the son, after an uncomfortable sense of something like smothered remorse within, was soon shaking off all memory of his sin, and entering into a lively conversation with a young lady and her mother, who were travelling in the same carriage.

Mr. Douglas hurried through the city to catch an early train for Chelstone. It was a day to be remembered in the monetary world. Banks in London, and banks in the country, were tottering on the verge of an abyss, and many fell headlong into it. It was a terrible crisis when great companies of limited liability were sowing misery and sorrow broadcast throughout England, as they suddenly confessed themselves unable to go on, and were one by one struck out of that list in the papers, with the mystic figures ranged by them, which were conned so eagerly by many anxious eyes.

And now, on this sweet May morning, a greater crash than any the monetary world had ever seen was at hand. Mr. Douglas took back with him to Chelstone the amazing news that the largest bill-broking house in England had collapsed, and, as it fell, had crushed a multitude in its ruin.

Mr. Douglas entered the Bank at Chelstone, just before the hour for closing, with this great piece of news upon his lips. As a banker he might feel himself secure ; but the time was an anxious one ; and having briefly communicated the fact that Endover and Bernard had failed for three millions of money, he passed into the private room, leaving Mr. Evans and

the two young clerks to stare at each other in blank amazement.

Scarcely, however, had the expression of surprise and wonder time to circulate amongst Mr. Douglas's officials, when a very high gig drove up before the Bank door. At the top of the gig sat a stout woman and a very small boy, who soon clambered down from the vehicle, and stood at the head of the big-boned grey horse, while his mistress effected her perilous descent, and reached the pavement, at last, with a heavy plunge, which made the old gig vibrate like a pendulum, and startled the nerves of the stolid big-boned horse so much that it pricked up one ear, and gave a certain deprecatory movement with its stumpy tail. Mr. Dene had not been able to resist watching the proceedings ; for the news of such a great event as the failure of Endover and Bernard was not sufficient to damp the zeal with which he always took notice of whatever went on in the street, visible from his desk by the window.

"You are very late, my good lady," was Mr. Dene's greeting, as the stout figure of the owner of the gig advanced to the counter, and began to fumble in a hand-basket for something, which was evidently of great importance. "The clock will strike three directly," Mr. Dene persisted. "What can I do for you?"

Ominous, indeed, was the sound of the voice which came at last from under the large black velvet bonnet, where some poppies and wheat ears were nodding over the crown.

"My name is Mrs. Day ; I am the wife of Humphrey Day, who broke his leg more nor six weeks agone ; and I am come on a message from him to the partners of this here Bank."

As Mrs. Day spoke, she was taking the large cotton glove from one hand with her teeth, while with the other she held tightly grasped a book, covered with white vellum, on which was written, "Humphrey Day, Bishop's Stoke."

"As my business is serious," she said, "I should like to speak to the partners."

"You are afraid Messrs. Endover and Bernard's crash will affect you, I suppose," said Mr. Dene ; "but I think I may reassure you, Mrs. Day."

"Perhaps you will assure me how it is that, on the twenty-third of March, my poor husband sent a sealed parcel, with 80*l.* of bank-notes, to this Bank, and that, in this here book you made up yesterday, you have put down 30*l.* ; whereby you make my poor husband in debt to the Bank, while the *contrairy* is the just case. He has 80*l.* to go to the other side—to the other side, I say !" repeated Mrs. Day, trembling with excitement, as she pointed to the figures in the bank-book, and the entry of 30*l.* on the twenty-third of March.

"Here, Hampden," said Mr. Dene, "you made up this good lady's book yesterday ; come and put your mistake right, if it is a mistake !"

"If it is ; if it is !" repeated Mrs. Day. "Just hark to that, and there's the boy outside, Tom Grist, who will swear he brought the parcel here, and how his

master was very particular that he was to run all the way from the Star and back again, 'cause it was of importance. It was the last day my poor husband was in Chelstone ; he was throwed out of the gig on the way home, that blessed evening, and he has been laying on his back ever since ; and what with the broken leg, and what with the rheumatics, he has very near left me a widow."

Mrs. Day wiped her face round and round with a thick white handkerchief, bordered with a red pattern, and paused to take breath.

Meantime, Ambrose had taken the book from Mr. Dene, and was comparing it with the ledger : Mr. Dene looking over his shoulder.

"No ; there it is, 30*l.*, in your hand, Hampden, too ; there is no mistake, Mrs. Day : your good husband must have made the mistake, not us."

"And is the word of a respectable man like Humphrey Day to be doubted, because of young jackanapes like you ; things are come to a pretty pass, I must say. Why, I can call Timothy Ball, who paid my husband for stock the sum that ought to be wrote down in these here books ; and I can call in Tommy Grist ; and both of them will swear the money was paid in, at least—leastways——"

And here Mr. Evans interposed, as Mrs. Day's indignation suddenly turned into a burst of sobs and tears, while she incoherently dilated on her husband's long illness and the doctor's bill ; and that he was now cheated out of his lawful dues.

"Mrs. Day, you must know that this Bank and

its officials stand above any suspicion of defrauding your husband ; the idea is too preposterous," said Mr. Evans, annoyed that a girl who had come in to change a sovereign should hear Mrs. Day's excited harangue. "There is some mistake, which we will do our best to rectify. Shut the office door, Mr. Hampden," he continued sharply, as the girl at last went out with her change ; "it is three o'clock ! If you will come in again to-morrow, we shall have time to go over the books, and then——"

"I don't stir till I see the partners. I promised—I gave my word to Humphrey, I did, that I would see Mr. Douglas. 'Don't you stand any nonsense from them clerks,' said he. 'No,' said I ; 'I won't ;' and I'll keep my word."

Mr. Evans retired again to the desk, where the books lay open, and where Ambrose and Mr. Dene were again standing.

"Let me see," he said, pulling down his spectacles, and making his pen-holder perform an uneasy tattoo on the side of his head. "Have you any remembrance of this transaction, Hampden ? The figures are yours evidently."

"Yes," said Ambrose ; "I suppose they are my figures ; but I can't remember the payment of the money—the twenty-third of March is so long ago. This is the first week in May."

"I know that," said Mr. Evans, sharply. "It is a great bore that people will persist in keeping back their bank-books, and causing us thereby a deal of trouble. The twenty-third of March ! Let me see,

I think I remember that date, because some bills of Rodgers, who has since failed, were not taken up on that day, and Mr. Sanderson kept me worrying over them for hours. Yes ; I certainly do remember that day."

"So do I, sir," said Mr. Dene. "I was absent at my cousin's wedding ; and Hampden——"

"I remember the day, too, now," said Ambrose ; "but I cannot remember anything about Mr. Day's money, nor the way it was sent."

"Call the boy in who, you say, brought the cash," was Mr. Evans's next order. "I dare say the horse will stand."

"Much more likely than that it should move," was Mr. Dene's remark, as Mrs. Day went excitedly to the window, and, rapping on the thick plate-glass, signed frantically to Tommy to come in.

In another moment Ambrose had admitted Tommy Grist, who stood with his fingers in his mouth, staring blankly at his mistress, and scraping his hobnail boots on the floor in a way which would have driven Mr. Sanderson distracted.

"Now, Tommy, you dunderhead !" was Mrs. Day's flattering greeting, as she pushed the boy up to the Bank counter ; "you tell how you was sent here with the parcel very particular from the Star on the twentyth third of March. Now speak up, will 'ee?"

But Tommy had not the remotest intention of speaking up. Perhaps he thought Mrs. Day spoke up enough for both. All that Mr. Evans could extract from him, in a low mumbling tone, was that

he shied the parcel on to the counter : that he said it was from Mr. Day, as he was told ; that a gentleman caught hold of it ; and that he runned back to the Star. But as to who the gentleman in question was Tommy could not say. He was precisely one of those dull, stupid boys—found even in these days of progress—in agricultural districts, who cannot bring themselves to tell their own names when asked, with anything like quickness or decision.

Never once did Tommy take his great fingers out of his mouth,—never once did he stop from scraping his shoes upon the floor,—while he mumbled out answers to the questions which were put to him ; and as to getting him to say who took the parcel from him—whether it was Mr. Evans, Mr. Dene, or Ambrose—all that could be extracted was,—

“ I didn’t look who he were. I doan’t know what he were like.”

“ He is next door to an idiot,” was his indignant mistress’s final remark ; “ that’s what he is ; but I suppose you gentlemen do not doubt now the money was brought here ; you won’t deny that. I expect to have our rights, and that there bank-book altered.”

“ I will consult Mr. Douglas and Mr. Sanderson,” was Mr. Evans’s decision ; “ and I will take every pains to have the matter gone into. If we find no error on our part, we shall probably wish to have an interview with Mr. Day himself, and the farmer who paid him the money on the day in question.”

“ My poor husband is crippled at his own home,

and won't be fit to come into Chelstone for many a market day."

"Well, well ; we can come and see him," said Mr. Evans, in a conciliatory tone, "if necessary ; but you will oblige me by leaving the matter with me to-day. Mr. Douglas only returned from London an hour ago, and is just now engaged with Mr. Sanderson on important business. Be assured you will not lose one farthing of this money, if it was ever put in our hands."

"Well, I shall come again to-morrow ; you may depend upon that, sir ; and I shall, as I say, expect to have our rights—our just rights—which we are all bound to look after, you'll allow that ; and so I wish you good afternoon."

Then, driving Tommy before her, Mrs. Day took herself and her basket out of the Bank ; and having mounted to her exalted position, chucked the reins, one of which she held in each hand, to the big-boned horse as a gentle hint, who woke up to a sense of what was expected of him, and jogged off down the High Street of Chelstone once more.

Other business was dismissed, the letters all signed, and the startling events in the money-world discussed, when, Mr. Sanderson having driven off in his carriage, Mr. Evans told Ambrose to bring the day-book and ledger into the private room, and explain, if he could, the fact that 30*l.* was entered on the twenty-third of March to Humphrey Day's credit, while Mr. Day declared *eighty* was the sum then deposited.

"For you know, Hampden, the writing in the

ledger is yours, and, moreover, you were alone in the Bank for the greater part of business hours on that day. It is rather odd that you do not remember unfastening the parcel, or the circumstance of that sharp lad giving it into your hands. It is an awkward business certainly: the storm in the tea-cup, however, compared with the grand hurricane that is now blowing over London. It is perfectly astonishing that Endover and Bernard should have fallen! Why, bless me, they were always thought to be as safe as the old Abbey out there! What next, I wonder? what next?"

"What next, indeed?" Ambrose said to himself, as by degrees the fact dawned upon him that he stood in a very awkward position, from which it seemed he was helpless to extricate himself. If, indeed, Mr. Douglas and Mr. Sanderson were satisfied that the money had been paid into the Bank by Humphrey Day, then a false entry had been made in the ledger, and who but himself could have made it? Before he carried the great books to Mr. Douglas he glanced again at the figures standing next Humphrey Day's name in the ledger. They were very like his—precisely like; and yet he had no recollection of writing them there; but that was simply the only thing he had to say.

Mr. Douglas was worn out and tired, dreading his return home, where he must tell all there was to tell of his eldest son's departure for what might be called necessary banishment, to his mother. It had been a heavy day's work for Mr. Douglas, and he spoke more

harshly than was his wont as Mr. Evans laid the case before him.

"Some one made the entry," he said ; "and if Mr. Hampden was alone in the Bank that day, he must brush up his memory about it. To-morrow," he said, "Mr. Sanderson and I will give Mrs. Day a hearing ; and we had better see the farmer who sold Day the cattle that morning, and Day himself, if possible. Perhaps, Mr. Hampden, as you do not attempt to deny the figures are yours, you will see that it rests with you to explain this matter to us."

"I cannot do so, sir," was all Ambrose said, as he gathered up the big folios again, when Mr. Evans closed them, and prepared to leave the room. "I have no recollection whatever of either Mr. Day or his money, although I remember I was alone in the Bank a great deal that day. I remember it because my little brother was then very ill, and I was in great distress about him."

"Well," were Mr. Douglas's last words, "you had better try to recall the fact of the parcel being left in your hands. The case is a serious one, Mr. Hampden, and that fifty pounds must be accounted for."

Ambrose was gone, and Mr. Douglas turned to Mr. Evans,—

"Evans," he said, "have you any clue to the mystery?"

"No, sir ; I have not. I believed Mr. Hampden to be utterly incapable of wronging any one of a farthing."

"So did I ; but facts are stubborn, and this is too

grave a matter to be lightly passed over. It will be noised through the length and breadth of the county, before the market is over to-morrow, that we have lost fifty pounds of Day's money: the mere report of it would be very prejudicial at this crisis."

"Mr. Hampden is very poor, I know," said Mr. Evans; "and the expense of this child's long illness has been very heavy; but he made the most honourable exertions never to owe a farthing. I could not for a moment believe he would touch money which was not his."

"The evenings are long now; will you oblige me by riding or driving over to Bishop's Stoke to see Mr. Day? He is too ill, I understand, to come here. It is a fine afternoon, and I daresay Mrs. Evans would like the drive. You can take a carriage from the Star on our account."

Mr. Evans bowed; and then it was arranged that, when the Bank had closed on the following day, Mrs. Day and her witnesses should have an interview with both the partners, and that, if possible, the matter should be finally settled.

As Mr. Douglas walked homewards, he came upon Ambrose, who was turning out of the Post-office, after having posted the business letters. He bowed respectfully to Mr. Douglas, as he always did, and the grave, earnest eyes, which met his for a moment, had nothing but truth shining out of them.

Mr. Douglas laid aside his stiff business-like manner, and holding out his hand said,—

"How is your brother, Hampden?"

"He is sinking rapidly," was the answer. "But we think all suffering is over for him now. I hardly know if he will live till to-morrow morning."

Mr. Douglas passed on, perplexed and sad. "There must be some mistake," he thought, "about that fifty pounds. I am inclined to think that thick-headed old farmer will find out he never paid eighty pounds into the Bank at all. But I hope it will be made clear, and satisfy every one's mind that it is not with young Hampden that the fault lies."

CHAPTER XII.

THE ANGEL MESSENGER.

“He was not all unhappy. His resolve
Upbore him, and firm faith and earnest
Prayer, from a living source within the will,
And beating up through all the bitter world,
Like fountains of sweet water in the sea,
Kept him a living soul.”—TENNYSON.

THERE was a gentle tap at Mr. Douglas’s study-door the next evening, and Violet entering, quickly said,—

“Papa, it is more than half-past six, and we are to dine at Hurst Hill ; have you forgotten it ?”

Violet had advanced to the table before she discovered that her father was not alone. She was dressed for her sister’s dinner-party, in a soft dress of light silvery grey, which floated about her in graceful folds, and was relieved by the blossoms of pink hawthorn in her hair, and pink coral ornaments on her neck and arms.

The day had been cloudy, and much rain had fallen ; but now, through the window of Mr. Douglas’s study, the western sun was sending a flood of glory, and every tree and shrub in the garden, on to which

it opened, was sparkling with countless diamond drops which hung from every tendril and spray.

Ambrose Hampden was standing before Mr. Douglas with his head a little thrown back, and an expression of proud self-reliance on his face. His eyes fell on Violet as she came up to the table ; and, putting out one of her small hands to meet his, she said simply,—

“I did not know you were with papa ; I am afraid I am interrupting you.”

Ambrose did not speak a word ; but he looked at her as if he could never look away. And suddenly, as by a hidden spell, his whole bearing and expression changed : the head drooped, the lips and eyes softened, and his resolution was taken. He had been on the point of telling Violet's father—what none but himself knew—that, on that twenty-third of March, the only person who could have falsified the entry in the bank-books, and received eighty pounds of Humphrey Day's money, was Willie Douglas. The whole truth had flashed upon him the night before. He remembered how Willie had carelessly sauntered into the Bank ; how he had agreed to keep guard while Ambrose took the strawberries to Cyril ; how, on his return, Willie had taunted him with extending his absence from ten to twenty minutes ; how he had then immediately left the Bank, and, with the exception of two or three days at the time of his coming of age, had been seen there no more. He remembered, too, how engrossed he had been about asking Mr. Evans to lend him five pounds ; and how he could

not bring himself to do it, when the old clerk forestalled his request, and, supposing it referred to a holiday, had rebuffed him at the outset.

The case had been brought before Mr. Sanderson and Mr. Douglas that day in their private room at the Bank: and the result was, that the united testimony of the farmer who had paid the money to Mr. Day; of Tommy Grist, as far as it went; and, above all, of a hieroglyphic memoranda of Mr. Day's, jotted down in a pocket-book, to the effect that he had put 80*l.* into the Bank, received for so many head of cattle, left no reasonable doubt in the minds of any one that the mistake, or intentional deception, did not lie with him.

Mr. Douglas had ordered the money to be placed to Mr. Day's account, and so far the matter had been settled; but Mr. Sanderson was pitiless in questioning and cross-questioning Ambrose. On him lay the responsibility, from him must come the explanation. If he had been in great distress for money, why had he not borrowed it from the Bank? It was preposterous to say he did not remember anything about the matter—he must remember it; and Mr. Sanderson thought the only course left to himself and Mr. Douglas was to give him a few days to consider his position; and then, unless he could clear himself from the imputation now resting upon him, they must request him to resign his office as clerk in their Bank.

After this, Mr. Douglas had asked Ambrose to come to him at his own house, in the hope that by a friendly and kindly appeal he might be brought to

confide in him. He had watched his young clerk with interest for many months, and he could not persuade himself that this man, with so much of the hero in his composition, could be guilty of fraud and deception,—that he who had fought the fires so bravely to save a child's life; and had fought, and was even then fighting, a far harder battle against the daily frets and trials which poverty ever brings in its train, especially when sickness enters the family circle,—that this brave-hearted youth could defraud the Bank of fifty pounds, and follow the theft with a persistent denial of knowing anything about the matter, seemed to Mr. Douglas impossible! But he knew full well that Mr. Sanderson would never be satisfied to retain Ambrose's services in the Bank with a suspicion like this hanging over him—a suspicion which the other clerks must needs share to some extent; and, moreover, he also felt that to keep Ambrose in the Bank, unless the mystery were solved, would be a bad precedent for the future.

"You know, Hampden," Mr. Douglas had said, "I cannot revoke our decision to-day, as the case now stands. But I do ask, and expect you to tell me, without reservation, as a friend, if you know anything about the matter. Do your suspicions rest on any one, Hampden?"

Ambrose did not answer.

Mr. Douglas continued, "The only person who could have received Day's parcel that day was yourself, for my son was in London;" and Mr. Douglas sighed.

Those two words—*my son*—were uttered in a stiff

constrained tone ; while, inwardly, the father was thankful that the very possibility of Willie being concerned in the matter was put aside by the fact, as he believed, of Willie's sudden departure to London on the morning of the twenty-third of March.

"Now, Hampden, tell me," Mr. Douglas had repeated : "have you any suspicions ?"

And then there passed through Ambrose's mind a bitter memory of slights and insults which he had endured from Willie ; a whole array of disagreeable and irritating words ; and, above all, of impertinent attentions to Mabel—his sister Mabel. He chafed at the very remembrance of all these things, and the proud spirit rose within him : an evil spirit, too, urging upon him, that here was a good opportunity of giving back to Willie Douglas some of the annoyance he had caused him, of turning the tables upon him ! Why should he not do so ? What cause had he to shield Willie from suspicion ? Why should he be the sufferer ? The words—"Your son was in the Bank for a few minutes"—would be enough ; then, at least, there would be ground for acquitting Ambrose, and room for supposing that another might be the transgressor. But the entrance of that gentle girl, who had ministered so tenderly to his baby-brother ; who had been as an angel of comfort and peace in his home ; who was dear to him as the first love of his manhood, softened him at once. She seemed to bring back his Lord's words : "If he smite the one cheek, turn to him the other also." Violet came in, as I have said, ready for dinner, her attractions heightened by

the soft, dove-coloured evening dress, which suited her so well ; the hawthorn blossoms in her hair, thrown out into full relief, as the western sunshine streamed through the window upon her slight graceful figure. After the few words she had spoken on first entering the room, she stood silent, looking at her father and at Ambrose—feeling that something was wrong, and yet having no idea what it could be.

For a few moments no one spoke ; when, with a sudden gesture, Ambrose turned towards Mr. Douglas, and said,—

“I can only repeat, sir, that I am innocent—entirely innocent—of the loss of that money. I can say no more ; and what would it avail me if I did ?”

“Stop one moment, Mr. Hampden ; my daughter is here, and we will not discuss this before her. I will come very soon,” he said to Violet. “I can dress in five minutes.”

But Violet did not go away, as her father seemed to expect. There was a sound of sadness and incredulity in her voice, as she asked,—

“What is wrong, papa ? What money is lost ?”

“My child, this is not a subject which you could understand. It is a little business matter which rests between me and Mr. Hampden ; you could not help us out of our difficulty.”

But Ambrose, who had been watching Violet's face, now said,—

“You could not help us ; or rather, you could not help me. But I will tell you what it is : fifty pounds was missed from the Bank six weeks ago, and I am

supposed to have taken it. I am accused of being dishonest—of repaying Mr. Douglas's kindness, and your kindness, with the basest ingratitude. Say, do *you* think I am guilty?"

And she answered, as she stood there with the sunlight streaming upon her hair, looking up into his face with her wide open, wondering eyes,—

"No; I am sure you are not guilty. It is impossible; I will never believe it!"

"Then I can bear everything," he said, with a sigh of relief. "Mr. Douglas, I shall go to the Bank no more. I must seek some other means of support; and when little Cyril is at rest from all his pain and suffering, then the others—my mother and sisters—must follow me wherever my lot is cast. It is better on every account that I should go. Let me take my farewell of you now; let me thank you for all your kindness to me and mine; and let me ask, as a favour, that you will believe in me, and trust me, though I cannot explain myself further."

"You must not go," Mr. Douglas said. "Stay, Hampden, and live down the suspicion which circumstantial evidence has thrown upon you—stay, and in time all will be made clear."

"Yes," he replied; "I know it: all will be made clear at last, sooner or later, but not now. At least I shall be happy in the consciousness that I have not attempted to throw the guilt upon another who might be innocent also, and that I have left behind me one who does not doubt me. Let me hear you say it once more," he faltered; "for I shall sorely need

comfort—let me hear you say you do not doubt me.”

“I *could* not doubt you,” Violet answered, in a low but firm tone. “Papa, papa, it is impossible that he should be anything but true.”

And then, frightened at the sound of her own voice, she left the room.

Ambrose stood looking after her, and then repeated her words.

“‘Impossible that he should be anything but true.’ May God bless her for those words !

“It is better I should go away, sir,” he went on ; “for, though I have ever tried hard to use some discourtesy rather than she should guess my secret, it must needs betray itself now. From the very first moment I ever saw her I felt that she was *the one* out of all the world to me—my queen amongst women from that day forward. Little did I then think that I should owe her, for her deeds of blessed charity, what no tongue can tell, that she was to be as a ministering angel to those I loved ; but so it has proved. And oh, sir ! forgive me that I love your daughter with a love that can never change ; hopelessly, I know, from my low estate, even before this dark cloud fell over me ; but if hopelessly, as I believe, still faithfully while life lasts.”

Strong and deep emotions stir the waters of souls like Ambrose Hampden’s, and unsuspected treasures rise to the surface. Mr. Douglas felt as if he were listening to the story of some true knight in days of old, rather than to the confession of a poor clerk’s

love for his Violet, his darling child. There was a ring of the true metal in every word Ambrose spoke. It was, as she had said, impossible that he should be anything but true. But, nevertheless, the father spoke calmly to Ambrose, almost coldly, as he said,—

“It is, indeed, better that you should leave Chelstone, Mr. Hampden, if it is as you tell me. I know you are too honourable ever to have spoken to my daughter a word which might tell her of your affection for her. Is it not so?”

“By no word or action have I wilfully betrayed myself, except once, and then I thought she did in some measure take my meaning; and I had determined to see her no more till—till—” Ambrose’s voice trembled—“till I had confided in you. It is all over now, and I must say good-bye. For my father’s sake—whom you knew in days gone by—bid me God speed!”

Mr. Douglas was greatly moved. The mixture of proud self-reliance and womanly tenderness in the boy’s nature was very striking.

“I do from my heart pray God to bless and prosper you,” he said, laying his hand upon Ambrose’s shoulder; “but you will hear from me again. If I can help you in your future, I will gladly do so. I will never forget you.”

In another moment, Ambrose was walking quickly across the wide hall of Cranstone House towards the door. As he paused to slip back the handle, he heard a low whine at his feet, and, looking down, saw Trove trying to attract his notice. The memory

of that winter's afternoon, when he had first seen Trove in his mistress's arms, came back to Ambrose. He recalled her words about Trove,—“he has no friend but me ;” and, stooping, he allowed the little dog's ecstatic caresses for a moment, saying,—

“Poor Trove—poor Trove! we ought to have a great deal of sympathy with each other. Good-bye, little dog.” And just as the carriage drove round to convey the party to Hurst Hill, Ambrose opened the door, and passed out of Cranstone House for the last time.

The dinner-party at Hurst Hill was one of the most successful over which Constance had presided. She had all the requisite elements for a good hostess. She was always entirely satisfied with herself and her own arrangements to begin with, and she was always perfectly self-possessed and able to carry on and promote the right sort of conversation at her end of the table. On this particular occasion she had guests to whom her husband desired her to do honour: amongst these a rich millionaire, and his wife, and son, who had lately come into the neighbourhood, and Mr. Pratt Jones's vote would be of importance to Frederick Hastings in the election, which could not be very far distant,—so those who were learned in the signs of the political horizon declared. Constance was quite determined that this vote should be her husband's; but she did not press her electioneering unduly as some ladies are prone to do. Mr. Pratt Jones only felt that Mr. and Mrs. Hastings were the most charming young people he had ever seen, and discovered

quite incidentally from Mrs. Hastings that her husband held precisely his views on a great question then freely canvassed in all circles in England. It was Mr. Ferdinand Pratt Jones to whom poor Violet found herself consigned for that hour and a half in the dining-room, which seems so short when passed with an agreeable companion, and is so interminable when one's neighbour is dull or uncongenial. Mr. Ferdinand Pratt Jones found himself wondering how it was Mrs. Hastings's youngest sister seemed to know so little of things and people—to have, as he expressed it, so little “go” in her. She seemed so unimpressed by all his grand boasting stories of the string of titled people he counted amongst his friends; his histories of grouse-shooting and deer-stalking; and his prowess in all manly sports, especially when with an embryo earl or marquis at his side, “fellows” with whom he had been at Eton or Christchurch. He gave it up at last, and turned his attention to the lady on the other side, whom he had the supreme felicity of discovering at last was the daughter of the Bishop of Hurstminster, who was staying at Hurst Hill for a few days.

When the guests were gone, Constance rallied Violet on her pre-occupied manner.

“I sent you down with a most desirable person, Violet, and you would not condescend to answer his questions, or listen to his stories: he is a capital talker. What can be the matter with you? The father and mother are certainly not quite at ease in society, but the son is above criticism.”

“In his own eyes, Consie,” said Frederick Hastings,

coming kindly to the rescue, as he saw Violet's rising colour, and distress at being thus publicly called upon to account for her manners.

His sisters and Miss Rivers were all looking at her, and Harriet Hastings said, "I don't think you are well, Violet;" while her mother rattled off a homœopathic prescription for nervous headaches and listlessness, which she was sure would be useful; but Mrs. Douglas said they must not keep the carriage any longer, and old Mrs. Hastings was cut short in the mazes of deciding whether belladonna, alternately with nux, or nux alternately with bryonia, ought to be taken.

"Is anything wrong, Violet? I expect you got cold by persisting in going out in that drizzling rain yesterday."

Violet did not answer; but as she sat by her father's side, she slipped her hand into his, and laid her head on his shoulder; and, with a pang at his heart, Mr. Douglas drew her close to him with instinctive sympathy.

It was midnight, and the stars were looking down upon the quiet town, and the Minster towers stood out grey and grand against the dark-blue sky, where a crescent moon hung, like a silver bow, when the angel messenger came for little Cyril. Mabel, whose turn it was to watch that night, saw a change as the Minster clock chimed twelve; and Cyril, suddenly opening his blue eyes, said, with a far-away, intent look,—

"Music! hark!"

Mabel knew what music he heard, and went to call her mother and Ambrose, and also, as she had promised, the humble friends who had loved the child so faithfully, so well.

"We will not wake the children," she said to her mother. "They have seen sorrow enough in their short lives."

"Sorrow! what was their sorrow compared to his?" Ambrose questioned, as he knelt by his mother's side, and put a loving arm round her waist, which with its firm pressure seemed to renew her strength.

"Hark!" Cyril said once more; "that's the organ, Mr. Mersy; let me stop and hear it."

"It's the angels, my blessed one," the poor old verger sobbed out; "the angels you used to talk about so pretty."

But Mabel spoke next:

"Darling! I think it is the voice of Jesus calling you home."

"Yes, yes," said the child. "Jesus said, 'Come, come to Me.'"

Then, suddenly, with the wonderful strength with which the flickering flame sometimes rises before it goes out for ever, Cyril raised his head from his mother's breast, and, looking round upon them all almost with the brightness of his days of health, said,—

"Mamma, Amby, Mabel, *do* listen! *do* look! it's so pretty! only—only—I am so tired and cold—and——"

The poor little weary head drooped again, and the shadows gathered over the baby face ; then, as the Good Shepherd drew near to carry the lamb in His arms, and fold him safe, safe for ever, a radiant smile illuminated it for a moment, as if the presence of the Saviour was so bright that the little form scarcely felt the chill of the dark river ; and then, with a few hurried breaths, the child had left them !

Ambrose carried his poor mother from the room, insensible ; and with an aching heart, he could have wished to change places with that cherished little brother. The battle seemed too hard for him—surely, it was too hard !—for he knew, before another four-and-twenty hours were gone, he must tell Mabel and his mother the heavy news that the suspicion of disgrace had fallen upon his name, and that he could go back to his daily work in the Bank no more.

It was Violet's frequent custom to come with Patty to the early Communion on Sunday mornings, at the Minster.

On this bright May-day, the bridal of the earth and sky, her father was with her—a circumstance once so rare, but which had happened several times of late. As yet no word of what passed in Mr. Douglas's study on the evening before had been spoken by Violet or her father. But there was a sort of tacit understanding between them, which both felt, though neither expressed it.

On leaving the Minster, Violet saw Ambrose and Mabel crossing the green, with rapid steps, to Monk's

Court ; and the force of long-established habit made her turn as if to follow them. Then she paused,—

“ Papa, I want to know how little Cyril is this morning ; may I go and inquire ? ”

Mr. Douglas’s answer was prevented by Mr. Mercer’s hurrying up to them.

“ Miss Violet,” he said, “ the dear lamb is gone ; just close upon half-past twelve last night he went—he did. Come in, Miss, and see him ; you’ll never see the like again. Beg your pardon, sir, for being so sudden like, but I am that took up with this here blessed child, I forget everything else.”

“ Papa, may I go ? ” Violet asked ; but the question was almost needless, for her father had already turned towards the house, old Mr. Mercer toddling behind.

When Mr. Douglas and Violet entered the sitting-room, they found only Ambrose and his little sisters there ; Mabel had gone upstairs to her mother, they thought.

The children threw themselves upon Violet, and wept out their childish grief ; while Ambrose stood by, with Mr. Douglas,—but both were silent.

Presently Violet gently disengaged herself from the little girls’ clinging arms, and whispered, “ I should like to go and see Mabel : may I go, papa ? ” she added ; “ I will not be long.”

“ You need not hasten, my darling,” her father said ; and Violet left the room.

In the hall she saw Mrs. Mercer, who beckoned her mysteriously to her own room.

"There's something wrong, Miss Violet," she said ; "there's more trouble here than the loss of this blessed child. Miss Mabel and her brother were up, talking all night, after they had left their poor mother alone with her grief ; and Miss Mabel's face, when she came out to go to church—dear ! I did wonder at her going—was white as a sheet ; and she almost broke down when I said she ought to be resting herself instead of going off to church. She said, 'Oh, Mrs. Mercer ! there is no rest for me yet ; and we shall have to leave you, Mrs. Mercer ;' and then she gave one great sob, and took her brother's arm, and went out. Lor ! Miss Violet, I wish you would find out what it's all about. She is gone into her room now. Mrs. Hampden is asleep. She would go back to the room where the darling lies. Just come in and look at them ; it's what I call most affecting—that I do."

Violet followed Mrs. Mercer, shrinking back a little as she entered the room where, on a sofa, worn out by weeping and exhaustion, Mrs. Hampden was asleep, breathing heavily ; and on the bed lay the little inanimate form, once so full of joyous life—once so round and rosy—now so pale and attenuated by long illness and suffering.

"He is at rest, darling Cyril—he is at rest," Violet murmured, and the words which rose to her lips found utterance,—"So He giveth His beloved sleep."

Some flowers which Violet had brought the morning before were strewed over the child ; and the smile with which he had bid adieu to earth as the glory

of heaven burst upon him, still lingered on his lips.
"Happy little Cyril!"

Violet could but contrast the worn and prematurely old face of the mother, so soon to wake to her grief, with that of the little sleeper who was to wake no more till the great Easter morning—when the dead shall hear the voice of the Son of God.

Poor Mrs. Hampden! Many had been her sorrows, and one, perhaps harder to endure in some sort than any that had preceded it, was near at hand: how would she bear it?

In the next room Violet found Mabel; she was kneeling by the bed, her face hidden, and not till Violet's arms were round her did she look up. Then she rose and said very gravely, the words coming slowly from between her pale lips,—

"I can't talk to-day. I want my strength, Violet; there is a great deal before me."

"Oh, Mabel! don't speak to me like that," Violet said. "I love you so much, I would do anything for you."

Mabel's tearless eyes looked stedfastly into Violet's; but she did not soften, only repeating,—

"I cannot talk now. I went—we went together to church, that we might get help and strength. Don't talk, or I may break down, and then what will they all do? what will Ambrose do?"

"Mabel," Violet said, "I loved little Cyril so much;" and she added, "Please, for his sake, don't turn away from me, I feel as if I could not bear it."

"Cyril, my little brother, is in heaven. It is not for him I am suffering now : it is for Ambrose, my brother—my good noble brother, who is left on earth to fight and struggle, and never to be successful. It is too hard !—too hard ! But what am I saying ? I got rid of all those dreadful thoughts half an hour ago ; don't bring them all back again !"

"I would not bring them back," Violet said, sadly, still holding the hands which did not return the caressing pressure, but lay in hers cold and motionless. "I want to try and comfort you, Mabel. Let me comfort you."

"You cannot comfort me," she answered. "Only God can do that."

"No ; I know it, dear, I know it ; still I want to tell you that I am as sure of your brother being true and honest as I am sure that the sun is now shining into the room ; and papa is sure too—I am certain he is. I know no particulars about the lost money ; but this I do know, that if it is lost it will all be made clear one day. It is quite impossible that your brother could take it?"

Mabel drew herself up proudly, and said,—

"I am glad you think so. How could any one who knew him think otherwise?" Violet's heart sank. Mabel's voice was so constrained and unnatural as she went on,—*"You will never know how great and good he is. Now, if he had a suspicion of any one else being guilty, he would not throw it upon a person who was not present to defend himself, and who might be innocent after all. He would not bring sorrow*

upon others ; he would far rather bear it himself. He was not made for these hard selfish days ; he ought to have lived when there was some sense of honour and chivalrous feeling amongst men : when deep religious faith was the mainspring of every action."

"What do you mean about another person being guilty?" Violet said, in a startled tone. "Why does he not tell papa if he thinks so? Why——"

Mabel shook her head. "I can say no more. My poor mother will soon be awake, and I must go to her. What a waking for her! Oh, darling little Cyril! my sweet baby brother! how glad I am for you!" Then Violet hoped the tears were coming; but the momentary passion of grief passed, and Mabel, kissing her gently, said, "Good-bye ; please, go now."

And Violet obeyed. Ambrose had left the sitting-room when Violet returned. Then she silently kissed Rosie and Katie, and, putting her hand into her father's arm, walked sadly homewards.

In the evening, after dinner, Violet answered her father's summons, and went with him into his study. She knew what was coming, and stood before him with folded hands to hear what he would say. He had not mentioned the Hampdens that day in the family, except to join with Mrs. Douglas and Lucy in their expressions of sympathy for those whom little Cyril had left desolate ; and not one word had been said about the other trouble which was hanging over Ambrose and his mother and sisters. Now her father calmly and deliberately told Violet the details,

which we already know, pointing out to her how strong was what might be called the circumstantial evidence against Ambrose, and defending Mr. Sanderson from any injustice in the judgment he had delivered.

"There was no one else, papa, I suppose, on whom the suspicion might rest?" Violet asked faintly.

"No one, as far as we know; indeed, the absence of the other clerks is satisfactorily accounted for on that day, and the figures in the ledger must be Hampden's. It is so clear a case, that is to say, it looks so clear, though I do find it hard to doubt that man."

"You do not really doubt him, father?" Violet said earnestly. "You do not doubt him any more than Mabel does, or than I do. I believe him to be true and honest; and, papa, the psalm for this evening seemed as if it were a prophecy of good for him who is falsely accused; for I am certain his just dealing will be made at last to shine as the noonday."

Violet, flushed with excitement and strong feeling, seemed to her father changed from the little, tender Violet, who had been the sweet influence of his life from her babyhood. He looked into her face, and saw what was written there; his child had passed the point where she had seemed to stand so long—longer than most girls, perhaps—"with reluctant feet, where the brook and river meet." Violet was a woman now. After a pause, he said—

"I will do all I can for the Hampdens, though the son is not to return to the Bank. I will see he has his salary sent to him in full, and the expenses of

the child's funeral I will gladly meet. For the rest, Violet, perhaps it is better he should leave the neighbourhood."

Violet looked at her father, and caught his meaning. Then she went near, and kneeling by his side in her favourite position, she hid her face on his shoulder, while he stroked her hair, and pressed his lips upon it.

"Darling child," he said, "we ought to have guarded you from this; but the gulf set between you and him seemed too wide for any thought of its being thus bridged over."

"I don't see how that can be," she whispered. "It is rather that he is so high above me, that it is only wonderful he has stooped so low."

"That is romance, my child—the romance of eighteen—the fact is very different. However, I give Ambrose Hampden all honour for the way in which he has acted in this matter. He told me yesterday, in this room, that no word which betrayed his attachment to you had ever crossed his lips. Is it so, Violet?"

"Of course it is, father, as *he* said so."

"But he implied that he did not think you were wholly unconscious of how it was with him."

Violet's face was hidden, and she did not speak. Her father went on,—

"Darling, I will not ask any questions. I will not even extract a promise from you, so wholly do I trust you. There need be no further intercourse between you and the Hampdens—such as there has been, I mean; you understand me, Violet?"

Still no answer, only the bowed head was pressed closer to her father's side. Presently she said,—

“Does mamma know?”

“No.”

“Then, please, will you tell her, and Grannie? but no one else, not Lucy, nor Constance. I shall get on very well, father; only, please, let us never talk of it. I will faithfully obey you. I should not be worthy of his love if I could do otherwise. I think I will go to bed now.”

She rose from her kneeling position, and pressing a gentle kiss upon her father's forehead, she left him. Violet went upstairs, and shut herself into her own room. The beauty of the early summer evening drew her to the window, which was wide open, and from which she looked out upon the distant hills, and the green pastures, and little copses, and the straggling villages dotted over the valley, which lay between her and them. Nearer, were the shrubbery and small plantations skirting the garden of Cranstone House, where the lilacs and laburnums waved in the gentle breeze, in the full glory of their blossoming; and the pink hawthorn, from which Violet had gathered the flowers the evening before, stood at the furthest extremity of the lawn, a miracle of beauty. A few trees to the right cast their long shadows over the expanse of grass; and in the branches of an acacia, only just putting forth the promise of its leaves, a thrush was singing its evensong of praise.

In the room beneath her, Violet could hear her mother singing, in a low sweet voice, a hymn, the

music of which Lucy was playing on the piano. She knew the hymn well ; it brought its comfort to her heart, and she repeated again and again,—

“ Cheer up, my soul ; Faith’s moonbeams softly glisten
Over the waves of Life’s most troubled sea.”

By the shining of that light, little Violet could see her way ; for her strong faith upbore her, and she felt it would be well—well with her, and well with those she loved—if only they could hold on to the end. She saw the line of duty marked straight before her, and she never thought of swerving from it. And here Violet had the advantage over many and many a young life, which has been similarly tried. With sweet thoughts of Him who was guiding her in the right way, she fell asleep, having prayed for those who were in any sorrow, of mind, body, or estate ; and giving thanks for those who, like little Cyril, had entered into the rest that remaineth ; who had slept the sleep God giveth to His beloved. It was a part of her unselfish nature, not to dwell, morbidly, on her own share of the trial. She felt within the depths of her heart, that she could have loved and trusted Ambrose as she could never love and trust another ; but her father’s prohibition seemed to her so natural, that no idea of rebellion against his will presented itself. Her mother, who came to look at her after she had heard her husband’s story, found her sleeping as quiet and peaceful a sleep as that of childhood.

There were a few drops upon the long lashes, which told of recent tears ; but there was a smile upon her

lips, and Mrs. Douglas bending over her, kissed her with the words—

“Dear, little Violet : how young and child-like she looks ; may God bless her.”

Once more Violet and Ambrose met. It was the morning of the day on which they laid little Cyril in his grave, under the palm-tree, in the old Abbey church-yard. Violet had made some wreaths of pure white flowers, to go down, out of the bright May sunshine, on the child's coffin ; and she and old Patty walked down into Chelstone with them, before the breakfast hour at Cranstone House. Violet had pressed her last kiss on the child's white brow, and was turning from the room, when suddenly she found herself standing face to face with Ambrose.

“I have been to say good-bye to Cyril,” she said ; but her voice trembled, and she had to rally her strength, or she would have broken down.

“Say good-bye to me, too !” he said, “for I leave Chelstone this afternoon. Say good-bye to me, too ; and let me give you my parting thanks for all you have done for him and us. May God bless you now and always.”

She bent her head ; but she did not speak.

“Violet, you believe in me still ?” he asked, with a touch of anxiety in his tone. “You believe I am honest ?”

The appeal roused her.

“How could I doubt you ?” she answered, firmly.
“I must always believe in you !”

"Thank you," he said eagerly ; "thank you a thousand times. Good-bye."

She looked up at him ; and her sweet, truthful eyes told him what he craved to know, better than her lips could have done. As they reached the top of the staircase, she turned suddenly, and put out both her hands to him. He grasped them for a moment, and so they parted. But the remembrance of that confiding, trusting glance, and simple child-like gesture, became a memory of joy to Ambrose, in the midst of sadness—a drop of untold sweetness in the cup given him to drink—a gleam of brightness over the troubled sea of life in which he found himself launched, to breast he knew not what waves and billows ; but with his helm stedfastly pointed towards the haven, where he will find anchorage at last !

CHAPTER XIII.

SUCCESS.

"Curved is the line of Beauty,
Straight is the line of Duty ;
Walk in the last, and thou shalt see
The other ever follow thee."

SCARCELY a week had passed since little Cyril was laid to rest in the churchyard of the old Abbey, when the Hampdens bid good-bye to Chelstone, and went to make a home in the heart of London.

Ambrose was recommended to Mr. Evans's son, the father of the boy he had saved from the fire, who was a sharp, active lawyer, as copying-clerk, and was to work for him at home, the remuneration given being proportionate to the amount of sheets which were covered.

Mabel had her needlework to depend upon, and Rosie and Katie were able to do a great deal more towards helping themselves in their own education than they had been eighteen months before ; while Mrs. Hampden still sat with a weary, sad face, which smote her son and daughter with fresh pain when they looked at it, as she counted up her

losses—the last, so sad and so hard to bear—the taking away from her the delight of her eye and, as it seemed, the last ray of sunshine, from her overshadowed path.

Their lodgings over the smart linendraper's shop, in a street, humble and insignificant, which was one of a maze of a like character, somewhere between Fleet Street and the Strand, seemed to the Hampdens cramped and close indeed when compared with the quaint old rooms they had inhabited at Chelstone.

But Mrs. Mercer had a relationship with their present landlady, and had written to her, commending the Hampdens to her good offices, as "real gentry come down in the world—which any one with half an eye 'might see."

Mrs. Perkins, however, was accustomed to value people on their appearance; and, having so much to do with ribbons, and mohairs, and glacés, she naturally felt aggrieved when she was called upon to pay respect to the poor widow in her rusty mourning and her three daughters; though she felt no difficulty in addressing Ambrose as *Sir*, and to endorse her aunt's accounts of him as "the true gentleman."

For, certain it is, Ambrose was less crushed than Mabel, by this blow which had fallen upon their prospects. The consciousness of having right on his side upheld him, and there was a light in his eye and a sweeter expression about his mouth than in old days.

There was also a source of joy to him which was a secret, even from Mabel; but he would sing over to himself the pleasant song, which no ear could hear—"She believes in me, and she has faith in me; I will not give in."

Nor did he. He wrote, and he taught his young sisters, and cheered his mother, and fought his secret battle against self and sin; and made his way, step by step, as he had never done before.

But Mabel drooped, and she was not, as of old, the one to take the most cheerful view of things, and encourage Ambrose and support her mother. She was often very tired, poor child; and she could not see why her brother should be wrongfully suspected, and make no effort to clear away the suspicion which rested on him.

Ambrose came home from the lawyer's offices one hot August evening, to find Mabel alone, sitting dejected and sad, with her hands clasped over her knees, and her eyes looking out into the straight line of opposite houses and shops, with a vacant glance, as of one whose thoughts were far away.

It was Wednesday evening, and Mrs. Hampden and Rosie and Katie were gone to service in a church near; but she had preferred to wait for her brother's return.

He had a heap of papers in his hand, tied with the legitimate red tape, which he put down on the table, saying,—

"Alone, May? You ought to go out every day, or you will be ill. I have good news for you."

"Good news!" she said, faintly; "that will be something wonderful now."

"Well," he said, "I believe I am in a fair way to earn more for you all here than in Chelstone, and not only by copying the 'aforesaid' and 'hereins,' and making these splendid capital letters, which Rosie says are like branches of trees with no trunks. Look here, May." He had a magazine in his hand, one that was familiar and well known. "I wrote this paper," pointing to one, as he held the book open towards her; "and I have been paid six guineas for it; and, moreover, the editor says, 'Further contributions will be received with pleasure.'"

A faint colour came to Mabel's face, and she said,—

"When did you write it? Don't work too hard. If you were to fail, what should we do?"

It was so unlike Mabel, to receive the news of his success so coolly. But Ambrose did not show any irritation.

"Well, you shall read this to-morrow, Mabel. Now you must come for a walk with me, as in old times."

"A walk! Where should we go? It is better here than in the streets," she answered, half fretfully and half impatiently.

"Poor May!" her brother said, laying his hand caressingly upon her shoulder.

The tender accents melted her. She sprang up, and threw her arms round Ambrose.

"I have been so cross lately—do forgive me! It is not that I mean to be cross, but nothing has ever tried me like this. That you should have gone away from Chelstone, and left Mr. Douglas under a false impression; for, Ambrose, you did not take that money, and I am certain you know who did take it. You know who put those figures in the book at the bank. You admitted it to me that first night. Now, it can't be right to hide it—it can't be right that you should suffer for the guilty."

"Can't it be right?" he repeated to Mabel. "I will tell you everything, because I think you deserve to know all. If there is any one in the world I have hated and detested—if there is any one in the world against whom I have cherished indignation and envy and all bad feelings—it is he who I believe forged those figures in the Ledger, and took the fifty pounds, knowing, as he did it, that the blame would probably fall on me. It would have been revenge if I had exposed him to suspicion; for remember, Mabel, I have no *proof* against him that others would recognise. It would be with him as with me, mere circumstantial evidence. In either case no earthly eye could have seen the act committed. I was alone in the Bank for hours that day; he was alone in the Bank for twenty minutes. Mabel, how could I go and meet my Lord, week by week in his Church, day by day in prayer, hour by hour in my toilsome life, and feel that I had sprung to take revenge on Willie Douglas for insults and scoffs hard to bear—above all, for conduct to you which

was intolerable, and is still enough to make me angry, I am afraid."

"It need not," she said; "it has passed away amongst the things that are too contemptible to remember."

"Well, then, Mabel, I have another reason over and above this,—I could not bow down his father's head with shame. I could not be the one to let all Chelstone know the son of such a man is a *thief*."

"All Chelstone need not know," she interposed.

"Need it not? Chelstone must cease to be what it is if that were so, Mabel. Things are proclaimed upon the housetop there, which are spoken in secret, may be truly said—but we need not dwell on this. I could not be the one to tell what might bring disgrace on that honourable name; I could not bring such a shadow over her whom I love. Put yourself in her place, Mabel; you can well imagine what she would feel."

"You mean Violet Douglas?" Mabel asked, quietly. It was the first time, though she knew his secret, that Ambrose had so openly referred to it.

"Yes," he said, "I mean Violet; she whom I love, and will love to the end," he added, solemnly. "I am not given to change, and she is worthy of my love, of the love of my life. You cannot be insensible to all she has done for us, Mabel: surely that must touch you; remember how well Cyril loved her."

The sudden mention of her little brother's name was always sufficient to move Mabel. Her love for

him had been that of mother and sister all in one. Her tears fell fast as she said,—

“Oh, Ambrose, I am glad our darling is safe ; but I miss him so much. Sometimes I think the world can never be the same to me again without him. Often I find myself trying to go to him, and to papa, and the others. I am not what I used to be ; mother is braver than I am now.”

Ambrose felt it was true ; she was not what she once had been ; and he determined to take counsel with his mother about Mabel, and try to persuade her to look out for a situation as daily governess, which would be better for her than that eternal stitching.

This plan was matured sooner than any one expected. Little Arthur Evans's mother had not forgotten what Ambrose had done for her, in saving her boy from the fire ; and she had frequently come to see the Hampdens, and had been very much impressed by Mabel's sweet face and pleasant address. She had one little girl, who was spoiled and unmanageable, and yet too precious to be trusted at school ; but her mother was conscious she was miserably inferior in speaking with propriety and in lady-like manner to those young sisters of her husband's copying clerk, who had no education except that which Mabel had given them.

Mrs. Evans was a kind-hearted woman ; and, if she had but little refinement or tact, and was not on very good terms with the letter *h*, she made up for the deficiency in some measure by an honest desire to show her gratitude to the Hampdens. This same desire had actuated her, when she pressed upon her

husband to let Ambrose have employment in his office—though the cautious lawyer took a middle course, and at present only gave him work to do at home, saying he must see how that little matter at Chelstone turned out before he committed himself too far. Mrs. Evans made her proposition to Mrs. Hampden one morning very soon after Mabel's conversation with her brother. The good little woman threaded her way very early from her smart house in Bloomsbury Square to Mrs. Perkins's shop, and took both her children with her.

The little sitting-room was very full. At one small table were Rosie and Katie, busily employed over some French translation, while Mabel and her mother were seated at the other, which was spread with garments of all kinds, which Mabel was overlooking for necessary repairs.

"Dear me, I am afraid I am come before you expected visitors," began Mrs. Evans; "but I was anxious to get here early. There, don't put yourself out of the way, Mrs. 'Ampden, please," as poor Mrs. Hampden began hastily to fold up some black skirts, rising from her seat in a disturbed manner to greet her guest. "My business is with you, my dear," turning to Mabel, "and your mamma, too, of course. I want to know what you will say to coming to teach Arabella every day; being her governess, you know, and dining with her at one o'clock, which is my lunch time, of course. Now, Arabella, speak, and say you'll be a good girl if Miss 'Ampden will come."

But Arabella made no sign. She was a great over-

grown girl of ten years old, who was certainly not a very inviting pupil, as she stood leaning awkwardly against her mother, playing with the long ends of velvet, with bells attached, which hung from Mrs. Evans's throat.

Arthur was more talkative ; and Rosie and Katie had to answer a great many questions about their brother—where he was, and what he was doing ? and on hearing that he was writing in his own room, Arthur dashed away, heedless of his mother's call, and was soon heard in the room above, where he told Ambrose that his mamma was downstairs, and had come to get his sister to be Arabella's governess.

Ambrose soon appeared in the sitting-room, and poor Mabel found herself shut out from all chance of escape. Then and there the bargain was concluded—Mabel was to give up her work for the Institution in Berner Street to her mother, and was to enter on her duties as daily governess to little Arabella Evans, with a salary of 40*l.* a year.

"You know, I want her made genteel and nicely behaved," Mrs. Evans said ; "that is the grand point. If you do that, and make her speak prettily and like a young lady, and get her to learn the beginning of music, I shall be quite satisfied. For I don't mind telling you, I am glad in any way to oblige you, and that I take a great interest in you all, that I do."

"I hope my sister's services will be found equivalent to what you are so kind as to offer her," said Ambrose, proudly ; "I will bring her myself to your house every morning, and call for her in the afternoon, if you will

tell us at what hours you wish her to begin and end her lessons. It is rather a long walk, and my sister could not possibly come without a companion."

"Oh! well, that I must leave to you. I will say from half-past nine till five, because I should like Miss 'Ampden to walk with Arabella in the square—Bloomsbury Square, you know—for an hour before dinner; and little Arthur will sometimes like a run there too, won't he?"

Little Arthur gave a ready assent, and also stipulated that Mabel was to let him come into the schoolroom sometimes; and so the matter was settled that Mabel should enter on her new duties in the following week.

"I am more fit to sew, and take care of mother and the children, Ambrose," Mabel said, when Mrs. Evans was gone. "You know I have no accomplishments. Mamma, I don't like leaving you."

"But, my dear, I think it will do you good to get more exercise. You look sadly pale, Mabel," said Mrs. Hampden.

"The business is settled; and now, Mabel, we will go and buy a new gown and hat, for you to appear in Mrs. Evans's schoolroom," said Ambrose. "You must let me do as I like with what I earn sometimes, and I have nearly got two pounds now that I am longing to spend. Make haste and get ready, and we will go down to the shop, and rise in Mrs. Perkins's favour by buying a gown of her, and one of those black straw hats which I saw in her millinery window yesterday." He spoke cheerfully, for success is sweet, especially sweet to one who had all his life

been disappointed in his efforts. Another paper had been accepted by the editor of the magazine, and an article Ambrose had sent to a daily newspaper had been favourably received. "Do you never write to Violet?" he asked, when they had completed their purchase, and had paid Mrs. Perkins over the counter for what they bought, and so insured her favour.

"I have written once or twice; but I am not a good correspondent, Ambrose."

"Write to her before very long," was the answer, "and let her know we are keeping our heads above the stream. Let her know that we are not engulfed yet; that the sky is clearing, and that God has prospered us."

It was pretty well known in Chelstone that Ambrose Hampden had left Mr. Douglas's Bank with some cloud hanging over him. Of course, Mrs. Day spread the matter abroad amongst the farmers' wives; and Mrs. Evans, though she believed in Ambrose's innocence, after a fashion, could not resist talking to some of her friends, in a mysterious way, about her sorrow that the brave young man, who had saved her grandson from the burning house, should have been obliged to leave the Bank; and how her son in London had given him employment. Then, old Mr. Francis deplored it to his patients, and told how Mr. Douglas had paid him most handsomely for his attendance on the little boy; and had, he knew, kept him alive for weeks by nourishing food and the best wine.

Little by little, however, the memory of the event

passed away. In a small town like Chelstone, one topic engrosses the public mind for a time, and is freely discussed on all sides; then another takes its place, and is equally interesting for a season; and, finally, the waters close over both, and both pass away from remembrance. But there was one faithful heart who never forgot little Cyril. The old verger had not been like himself, his wife declared, since that child had been taken away; and many visitors to the Abbey were told incidentally by Mr. Mercer "that—that there little stone cross in the churchyard was put up to a child who used to know every nook and corner of the Abbey as well as he did himself—and could tell the story of most of the monuments wonderful—and who was as beautiful as an angel." Violet Douglas often paid the little grave a visit, and took flowers to lay upon it every Sunday morning, and she would sometimes call upon the Mercers, and exchange any tidings of the Hampdens with them.

One bright autumn day Mrs. Mercer met her at the door with the news of what we already know; for Rosie had written to tell her that Mabel was to be a governess to little Arthur Evans's sister, and that Ambrose had written in a magazine!

Violet could not help feeling that the Hampdens were far less communicative to her than to the old Mercers, and something like a pang shot through her.

"I always said," Mrs. Mercer went on, "that it was a long lane that had no turning; and that very likely they would prosper better in London than ever they did here; and, I am proud to say,

I was right. This here is a dead-alive place, Miss Violet—though Mercer is so fond of it, and can't see how much I gave up in coming to live here when we married."

"Well, my dear," her husband interfered, "that's an old story now. We've been married forty-one years come next Michaelmas."

"You needn't go and interrupt like that, Mercer. I was saying Chelstone is a dead-alive place; and Miss Violet will not contradict me, if you do."

Miss Violet did not contradict Mrs. Mercer; but it was only a languid smile with which she listened to Mr. Mercer's rejoinder,—

"No, my dear. Miss Violet is too perlitte to contradict; she is not so contrary as some folks are! I know that."

"Well, I ain't agoing to quarrel with you, Mercer. I will tell Miss Violet, what she'll be glad to hear: that our lodgers are very quiet, and likely to stay, and that once I should have thought them perfection. But, lor! it is odd how I'd give a good deal to hear the sound of those little galloping feet, that I was so afraid would wear out my stair-carpet. I would give a good deal to have my door bounced open, and see that child's face peeping in, and say, 'Mersy, I'll be very good if I may come.'"

Mrs. Mercer's eyes filled with tears, while her husband left his chair, and shuffled up and down the room, with his hands at his back, just as he paced the aisle of the Abbey, saying,—

"Dear, dear! it's a mystery, I say, why flowers

like that are cut down, and poor withered old stumps like me, for instance, left. But, there, I shall not forget what Mr. Ambrose said, when he bid me good-bye. 'We shall know it is all right one day. It is not that it is *wrong* now,' says he, 'mind that : only we ain't *wise* enough to see that it is right,' or something like that."

"We shall know that it is all right," Violet repeated to herself, as she went slowly towards the High Street—where she was to meet her father. She passed on the way a bookseller's shop, and turned in to buy the August number of the *Hillsborough Magazine*, where, Rosie had told Mrs. Mercer, Ambrose had written such a beautiful story.

She was coming out of the shop with the magazine in her hand, when she met her father. For many weeks the Hampdens' name had not been mentioned between them. Violet had found herself isolated in her interest, and she had shrunk from listening to remarks which, however natural, were trying to her, more, not less so, as time went on. Mabel had only written to her twice. She was, as she had told her brother, a poor correspondent; and Violet had found no difficulty in showing these letters to her father. They were bare details of their London life, and nothing more.

The magazine was a different thing. As she walked by her father's side, she peeped in between the uncut leaves with tremulous eagerness.

They were his thoughts, his words, which she was now to read; and she wondered if they would give

her any clue to his present life,—how he was fighting against his difficulties—how he was bearing up against disappointment and unjust accusation.

Little Rosie had not mentioned the title of the paper, and Violet looked through the contents on the first leaf, that she might decide which was the one she sought. It was not the serial tale, which had been going on for some months, she knew; not that one headed, "History of an Alpine Expedition;" not another, the "Political Aspects of the Times," but the fourth on the list struck her, "The Problems of Life."

That surely was his; and, looking if there were any signature, she saw, a few pages further on, the letters "A. H.," which decided the question.

"Well, Violet, what is there so deeply interesting in the *Hillsborough* this month? We gave it up at Christmas, because we thought it had fallen off so much, did we not?"

"Yes, papa; but there was something in this number I wanted to read, so I bought it."

She stopped. How many girls would have said no more! But Violet was faithful and true, in the letter and in the spirit.

"Papa," she said, gently, as they reached Cranstone House, "there is an article in the magazine written by Mr. Hampden. His little sister told Mr. Mercer about it, and also that Mabel has got a situation as a governess, at Mrs. Evans's—Mr. Evans's daughter-in-law, papa!"

"Ah, yes! old Evans told me that it was so, some

days since. How is it that I forgot to tell you, I wonder? I really hope that it will prove the Hampdens have not suffered so much by that unfortunate business, which is wrapped in as great a mystery as ever."

"Papa, a few days ago something struck me which I think I should like to tell you, as I have told Grannie. It may, of course, be nothing; and, I suppose, I ought to *hope* it is nothing. But I was reading some verses from a little book of poetry Aunt Isabella gave me on the day I came home from Bonchurch, last spring, and I found the date in it—March 23rd. *That* was the day, papa, the money was taken or lost from the bank—that was the day you said Willie went to London. Papa, Willie was *here* the first evening I was at home. He must have gone to London on the 24th, and returned on the 26th."

Mr. Douglas did not answer for a moment.

"Are you sure of this, Violet?"

"Quite sure, papa. There can be no mistake about the date."

"I do not see how this clears up the mystery, Violet."

"I do not say it does, papa; only, you know, Willie might have been in the bank that afternoon, when Mr. Evans was with you; and no one seems to have thought it possible, because Willie was supposed to be in London."

A shock of fear and dread seemed to pass over her father's face; and Violet almost repented of what she had said.

He turned sharply from her without another word, and went towards the house, while Violet pursued her way to Grannie's.

From her she had no secrets; and the magazine was opened, and Grannie said kindly,—

“Will you like to read me the story, Violet?”

“Yes, dear Grannie; but it is not a story, I think, unless it is the story of his own life; the title almost tells that it is.”

Then she looked suddenly up into the dear old face, and met an expression there which made her colour come.

“Grannie, I could not read this to any one but *you*,” she said. “It was a great effort even to tell papa it was in the magazine, only I thought it right to tell him why I bought it. Do you understand me, Grannie?”

“Yes, darling, and I honour you for your high principle. I seldom speak to you now, Violet, on this subject; because I hold that many words are not only useless in such a case, but do harm; but you always have my sympathy. Thank God, though I am old now, I do not forget that I was young once.”

“Grannie, you are *all* sympathy about joys and sorrows. There never was any one like you. Mamma said so yesterday—how much more you entered into her feelings about Willie than Lucy or Constance do; and how, when she hears from him, her first thought is, after papa has seen the letter, to bring it to you.”

"The accounts are good, I think, altogether. Mr. Vernon seems satisfied, and Willie entirely contented."

"For the present," said Violet doubtfully; "only I always dread what may come. When we thought ourselves secure in the spring, he went off suddenly to London, and then there was that dreadful scene just after he came of age. I told papa of that mistake in the date of Willie's going to London, Grannie—I thought I must tell him—but I do not know whether he will act upon it in any way."

"Willie has been told of the loss of the money, and of the suspicion resting upon Mr. Hampden, I suppose?" Grannie asked.

"Yes, I think so; but I have not seen any notice of it in his letters. Lucy had one, which she said was private property; but I don't know what was in it. Grannie dear, is there anything to be done?"

"My darling, I think not; but let patience have her work, and let us wait."

Violet said no more; and, after a silence, she began to read, in a low shy voice at first, but she gathered power and courage as she went on, as if the strong, brave words gave her strength; for there was a ring of victory in the strain of the writer which rejoiced Violet's heart. If the problem of his life's story were hard to solve, he was content that it should be so; for was he not learning to trust where he could not understand?

CHAPTER XIV.

GOD DEFENDS THE RIGHT.

"I praise Thee while my days go on ;
I love Thee while my days go on ;
Through dark and dearth, through fire and frost,
With emptied arms, and treasure lost,
I thank Thee while my days go on."

E. B. BROWNING.

WHEN we gathered primroses from the hedges, and violets from the woods, in the days of our childhood, how long seemed the time that lay between us and the year before, when we filled our baskets with the same treasures, and threaded our way through the same tangled copses, or uneven shrubby walks. But, in later life, when once more the early flowers look up at us, with their starry eyes ; when, on some quiet spring day, we hear the carol of the birds, and the soft tinkling of waters running down from their hidden sources, far away among the hills—thus to lend their sweet treble accompaniment to the sounds, with which all nature proclaims that the sleep of Earth is over, and the Easter tide of the Church draws near—we only feel how quickly time is speeding onwards !

It may be that we cannot tune our hearts to the music of the spring, but rather sigh over the rapid flight of years, which carries us with it, and brings us no renewal of freshness or joy, as it does to the things around us, now so jubilant in their ever renewing youth and gladness. There are, however, many hearts who have power to look beyond the spring-time of earth, to the everlasting spring of the better life beyond the grave, and to long for grace to redeem the time, and stretch forward to eternity.

As Mabel Hampden sat in the schoolroom at Bloomsbury Square one morning, watching Arabella's rough handling of some primroses she had bought of a flower girl on her way with Ambrose to her daily duty as Mrs. Evans's governess, her thoughts were busy with the past. Those primroses, stiffly laid together, and surrounded by a prim border of leaves, carried her back to the spring days, a year ago; when her little Cyril lay dying, and caressed the flowers the children brought him so often, with his tiny thin fingers, saying as he touched them, "I *love* them; oh! may I love them!"

"I can't undo this string," said Arabella at last, as she gave the primroses a violent twitch, which severed several heads from the stalks, and roused Mabel from her dream.

She exclaimed, "Oh! take care, Arabella, give me the poor flowers, and let me arrange them in that saucer."

"Oh! pray, take them, I don't see much in them, Miss Hampden; now I care for the flowers at the

show. Oh my ! it is a pity you did not go with us to Chiswick last summer ; there were great piles of geraniums, and even the 'ollyhocks were splendid."

"Hollyhocks, Arabella," corrected Mabel despairingly ; for those fugitive *h*'s of Arabella's were so hopeless to catch, or if caught, so difficult to get put in the right place. "I like primroses better than any flower ; but, then, I remember gathering them when I was a little girl. There they look happier now," she said, as she gently placed the flowers in the water ; "that is how Cyril liked to see them."

"You talk of him as if he was alive," said Arabella. "Why ! mamma won't have Bertie's name mentioned ; he was the brother of ours that died, you know."

"We talk of our dear little brother and sisters, and of our father, too, very often," Mabel said ; "because we like to think of them as near us, and in a home where we shall meet them again, some day ; but now, Arabella, we must begin our lessons in good earnest."

Arabella dragged her chair to the table with her foot, and began to open her books. The lessons went on for an hour without interruption ; when the school-room door was burst open, and Arthur rushed in.

"Here, look here ! Mr. Hampden wants to see you. I was sliding down the banisters, and nearly fell upon his 'ead in the 'all. He says, he must see you ; shall I bring him in ?"

"I think I had better go and see my brother in the dining-room, Arthur," Mabel said, rising and turning very pale ; "something must be wrong at home. Stay

here, like good children, quietly ;” and Mabel hastily went downstairs.

“Ambrose, what is it ?” she asked, as she joined her brother in the dining-room ; where full-sized portraits of Mr. and Mrs. Evans, and their children, painted in flaring oil-colours, stared down from the heavy gilt frames, hanging on the red flock paper which adorned the walls.

Ambrose saw how frightened she looked, and hastened to reassure her. “There is nothing wrong,” he said. “But when I got home from the office, with my papers, after leaving you here, I found a telegram from Mr. Douglas. Here it is.”

Mabel took the paper from her brother, and read—

“If possible, I wish to see you immediately at Cranstone House, on business of importance.”

“What can it be ?” she questioned ; but then looking up into her brother’s face, she added : “It is to tell you that the thief who took the money is discovered. Oh ! Ambrose ; we shall be happy, then, at last.”

“Don’t be too ready to jump to a conclusion, Mabel,” he said, “and be gentle in your judgment ; remember how terrible will be the grief and sorrow of those connected with him, if the person is indeed the one on whom our suspicions rest. I cannot forget, Mabel, who will suffer, as you suffered for me.”

“It would be quite a different thing,” Mabel said

“Violet Douglas had no love for her brother, none with mine for you ; and she never could be proud of him.” She laid her head on his

shoulder for a moment, and went on. "It has broken me down, Ambrose, and I have never felt like myself since: that you should have to leave a place like Chelstone, because you were suspected of theft, was too much. I *could* not see it was just or right; it has been better of late, but still it has weighed me down. I could not forget it. What does mamma say?"

"I have not said very much to her: merely telling her that Mr. Douglas had sent for me, and that she and the children must come here for you this afternoon. I must go now, for I have barely time to catch the train." He threw his little black travelling-bag over his shoulder, kissed Mabel affectionately, and left the room. Then he returned for a moment. "May, here are some sheets to correct. I did think I would take them with me, but, on second thoughts, I will leave them with you. You will overlook them for me this evening, and I shall be home to-morrow."

He gave her a bundle of papers, and was gone; and Mabel returned to the dingy schoolroom, and her weary routine with Arabella Evans. Was it better than stitching for the Institution in Berners Street? She often doubted it. For, with all the kindness of heart, which characterised Mr. and Mrs. Evans, and with all the gratitude to Ambrose, which they both really felt, they lacked the tact and refinement of feeling, which alone can make the governess, whether daily or resident, at ease with those who employ her. Mabel had often to endure a great deal that jarred upon her feelings; and not

the least was the frequent reference made, whenever Chelstone was mentioned, to the brave rescue of Arthur from the fire, and the great grief it was to the whole Evans family, that a suspicion of dishonesty should have fallen upon Ambrose.

But, in spite of all these drawbacks, Mabel's health had greatly improved. She was more like the Mabel of old, than she had been during the first few months of their residence in London ; and helpless indignation against those who wrongfully accused her brother, had gradually been overbalanced by pride and pleasure in his present success. For Ambrose seemed to possess the power of writing what was accepted with readiness by editors and publishers, and read, so Mabel could not doubt, with profit. She dwelt fondly on his successful efforts, and thankfully on the spirit which pervaded all he wrote, as well as all he did. There was a golden thread running through everything, which told that he lived for something beyond and above mere earthly praise and blame ; a full chord of deepest meaning, which proclaimed that the key-note of the melody was touched by the music of heavenly things.

The year which Ambrose Hampden had passed in London had changed him greatly. His manner and bearing were now those of ripened manhood, and as he walked up the High Street of Chelstone, on that sweet spring evening, several eyes followed him, as one whom they ought to recognise, and yet failed altogether to identify.

The Abbey towers were rosy red with the western

light, as he paused beneath them for a moment, to look earnestly at the windows of Monk's Court, and at the low oak door, from which he had so often seen his little brother bound to meet him; and in later times, had watched Violet's figure pass in and out on her ministry of love.

A year had gone by since those days of Cyril's illness and Violet's frequent visits, and now Ambrose questioned himself as to what he should find at Cranstone House? If the cloud were to be dispelled which had shadowed the last few days of his life at Chelstone? How would it be with Violet? Would she confirm that last parting act of faith and trust, by a surrender of herself to him? Would her father bestow her upon him, or would the distance between them prevent it as much now as in days gone by? These and many like questions filled Ambrose's mind, and so occupied him, that he found himself under the shadow of the budding lime-trees, and at the iron gates, before he was aware of it. His heart beat fast as he walked up the drive, and mounting the steps before the house, rang the bell. Ellis opened the door, and received Ambrose with the same imperturbable gravity which always characterised him; but still there was an added solemnity in his bearing as he preceded Ambrose to the door of his master's study, which seemed to betoken that something more than usually important was pressing even upon Ellis's mind at that moment. He placed a chair by the fire for Ambrose, and said Mr. Douglas had not yet left the dining-room; but he would let him know he had

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arrived. This seemed to imply that his coming was expected by Ellis, as well as by his master; and Ambrose waited anxiously for Mr. Douglas's appearance.

Some numbers of the *Hillsborough Magazine* lay upon the study table; and a smile of triumphant pleasure lighted his face, as he saw written on the outside of one, V. D. It was hers, then, and she had read what he had written, perhaps. He opened the book, and glancing at the contents, saw a little faint pencil line under a sentence he had written, thinking of her all the time as he wrote, he well remembered,—

“Perfect faith in us, and in all our words and actions is rare. Misgivings throb through the breasts of those who love most, at times, that the one who is loved may in part be ideal; that something at least of that which is as an abiding refuge to us, may be a mirage, and substantial only to ourselves. But *if* this perfect faith should indeed exist for us, in one loving, tender, noble breast, does it not go far to make the unfaith of all the rest of the world but as dust in the balance?”

The smile still lingered on Ambrose's lips; and he had not laid the book down upon the table again, when the door opened, and Mr. Douglas came in.

The stately head was bowed, and the firm, resolute tread shaken and altered. The few abrupt words which Mr. Douglas spoke at last could not startle Ambrose more than did that first sight of him—he was so changed—so sadly changed.

"Mr. Hampden, I have sent for you to tell you that your name is cleared from every shadow of doubt or suspicion. My son has confessed to me with his own lips that he forged the figures in the ledger, and appropriated to himself the fifty pounds."

Ambrose bowed in acknowledgment of what Mr. Douglas said, but he could not speak.

"It is my intention to call together in my room at the Bank all those who might naturally suppose that it was our desire—Mr. Sanderson's and my own—that you should resign your clerkship in the Bank. The farmer, Mr. Day, and his wife must hear the truth, as well as the officials, and any others who may have been influenced in their judgment by this unhappy circumstance. As for you, Mr. Hampden, what can I say more to you? No words can tell the depth of my humiliation, nor the grief that wrings my soul that my son's sin should have brought upon you so much trial,—sending you away from a post you were filling faithfully and zealously, with the shadow of suspected fraud hanging over you. I have one question to ask, which I desire to have answered, Did you believe my son was guilty?"

"I believed," said Ambrose, "that it must be he who abstracted the money, or knew who had abstracted it; but I had no proof—no absolute proof. During the twenty minutes I was absent from the Bank, Mr. William Douglas took my place. My mind was full of our great money difficulties on that day, and I was trying to find courage to ask Mr. Evans to lend me 5*l.* to supply my little brother's needs. When I

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returned to the office, I did not notice the figures as I called off the names when we closed the books, and for six weeks all thoughts of that afternoon faded away."

"But why did you not tell me that you had a suspicion? Was I not your friend?"

"Yes," said Ambrose, earnestly; "but that was one of my reasons. I knew God would defend the right; and I would not be the one to tell you that which was to bear you down with sorrow. I prayed for help," he said, reverently, "not to indulge my feelings of revenge by casting a reproach on your son's name. His bearing to me and to mine from the first had been offensive, and I found it hard to forgive him. If I had acted on my first impulse, and told you or Mr. Sanderson of my suspicions, I should have been the means of bringing sorrow upon you and upon one I love." Ambrose raised his head, and spoke firmly. The time was come now, and he was not ashamed to mention her name. "At last I am free from this; at least I have not given your son evil for evil, and I have not let Violet suffer one pang that I could avoid. For the rest, God has prospered me: we have not undertaken anything during the last year that has not been successful; and I am quite content, for my mother's and sisters' sake as well as for my own, that we left Chelstone when we did."

Mr. Douglas had seated himself in his chair, and covered his face with his hands. He looked so bent, and aged, and worn out, that Ambrose's heart was deeply touched. There was a silence, which Mr. Douglas was the first to break,—

“Ten days ago we were summoned to Paris to see our unhappy boy. He left St. Petersburg from ill-health, and broke down entirely at Paris. When his mother and I reached him we thought he had not many hours to live. But God has in his mercy spared his life ; may He give him grace to repent. His poor mother and one of his sisters are with him, and I must return thither soon ; but I felt I must lose no time in making you all the reparation in my power. My poor boy, stretched upon a bed of sickness from which he can never rise to be a strong man, fills me with pity. I ask you to be pitiful too. I think so generous and noble a nature can afford to forgive. My son,” he went on, after a pause, “was sorely pressed by one of his bad companions—an older man, who has been the evil influence of his life—for a so-called debt of honour. I had so distinctly stated that I would not give him another farthing, after I increased his allowance, that his courage failed to apply to me. The sudden temptation came, and he fell into the snare, fully intending, he says, to replace the money on the first of April, when the time for drawing his allowance would come. But debts multiplied ; a terrible time of reckoning came, as you know ; and our only hope for him was to send him away from all the mazes of sin in which he was entangled. As far as I can judge outwardly, his conduct has improved at St. Petersburg ; but the thought of the past has weighed upon him, and, in spite of every effort he has made to forget, his conscience would assert itself, and would be heard. Then a delicate constitution

gave way more and more, and Mr. Vernon, who is an uncle of his mother's, wrote to me two months ago, urging upon me the expediency of our recalling our son to his native country. I think," Mr. Douglas continued, after a pause, "that is all I have to tell you. I am anxious to make the public avowal as soon as possible, and then I propose taking my daughter Violet to join the rest of the family, and I shall leave a nephew of Mr. Sanderson, whose name you may have heard—Mr. Watson—to take my place. He went out to New Zealand some two years since, but has returned within the last three months, and will be received as a working partner in the Bank. For myself, I can never be as I have been in Chelstone; never hold up my head amongst the people who have trusted me and my father before me for so many years, and amongst whom my name has ever been honourable and honoured. It is a sore trial, Mr. Hampden, and crushes me to the dust. God only knows what I have suffered and must continue to suffer to the end."

"Do not say so, sir," Ambrose interposed. "The remembrance of this will pass away from people's minds; and, surely, your name, which is without reproach, could not really be less esteemed because——"

"My son is a thief, and capable of the most dishonourable action, in suffering you to rest under this suspicion for a whole year," Mr. Douglas finished the sentence bitterly. "No, Mr. Hampden; the world is never too kind, and the little world of Chelstone is not exempt from the weakness of the great world

beyond it. But now what can I do for you? In any way, can I help your onward path? only tell me."

Mr. Douglas had risen from his chair, and he and Ambrose stood face to face. It was impossible not to be struck with the improvement in Ambrose's whole manner and appearance; and, involuntarily, Mr. Douglas said, "It would be folly to ask you to resume your place in the Bank as a junior clerk. You are worthy of higher things: you have set your foot upon the ladder of literary effort, and I see, in what you have achieved, much promise for the future; but you must needs live while you work, and you must let me provide for your mother and sisters while you win for yourself a place and a name. I must do something; do not hesitate to tell me what that something shall be."

Ambrose waited a moment, and then he said,—

"I will return to the Bank if it should please you to receive me. I could still find leisure for the reading and writing, which I had begun long before I left Chelstone. But I am bound to repeat now that which I told you before—that the love I bear for your daughter is changeless, and has strengthened with time and absence. I pray to be allowed to hope—only to hope—that whatever else I miss in life, I may win her."

Mr. Douglas winced; this was more than the half of his kingdom, which he was ready and willing to lay at Ambrose's feet. But Violet—his Violet; what would "our lady of Hurst Hill" say if he were to yield in this? Her mother, too; what would she say? for brighter prospects had been dawning, as she fondly

hoped, for their darling. Mr. Douglas felt sorely tried, and knew not what answer to make.

"I think, Mr. Hampden, this matter may rest for the present. We shall be away for some months, most probably; it may be, that some of us, at least, may winter abroad. Any way, you and your family will, I hope, return to Chelstone; and if I can provide a home for you, I shall be only too glad to do so."

Ambrose felt that the great point was avoided in this reply of Mr. Douglas, and he said,—

"I could not return to Chelstone to be near her; to see her, perhaps, sometimes, and pledge myself that she should never guess how much I loved her. If you cannot give me hope, I must pursue my present life in London and wait."

The resolute determined tone struck Mr. Douglas.

"Well," he said, "Mr. Hampden, I cannot decide now as to the best course to pursue; you must give me time. Mr. Evans expects you as his guest to-night: to-morrow we shall meet; for I have a duty to perform. Those who heard suspicion cast upon you must hear you cleared from every shadow of blame. It is just that I, who am the father of the guilty one, should take upon myself to declare your innocence."

"I do not see the necessity for this painful task," said Ambrose. "I am satisfied; why should you impose it upon yourself?"

"Because it is just that I should do so," was the answer; and with a fervent pressure of the hand, Mr. Douglas and Ambrose parted.

At the gate, in the gathering twilight, Ambrose saw

a boyish figure advancing towards him. It was Charlie Douglas, who had returned for his Easter holidays, grown and developed into a tall, handsome Etonian.

"I will walk into the town with you," he said. "I am so glad to see you ; it is awfully jolly that you should come clear out of that horrid business ; though, of course, it is hard enough for us all to know who was guilty. I can't talk about that, however, though I feel more than some people, who shall be nameless. Look here," he continued, whistling in boyish fashion, "Violet and I are great allies, and always have been. I wish to tell you that you have got a friend in me, and always will have one. It is quite enough to have one sister married to a swell, and we don't want two."

"I don't understand you," said Ambrose, shortly.

"Oh, well, you know, there has been a fuss lately about a Mr. Pratt Jones, who has fallen in love with Violet ; and 'our lady of Hurst Hill' was aiding and abetting the scheme, and has been bullying Violet about it. She says 'No,' and Consie says 'Yes ;' and papa halts between two opinions, and mamma and Lucy side with Consie. She will never marry him, I know well enough ; though they do think it would be such a fine grand thing."

Charlie said this, and a great deal more, and Ambrose made no rejoinder.

"Where are you going ?" the boy asked, as Ambrose stopped at the turn to Monk's Court at last.

"To see our old landlord and his wife," was the answer. "Good-bye, Charlie."

"Good-bye;" and Charlie went swiftly up the road again, saying to himself; "He is awfully jolly, no doubt, that fellow; but he need not be so grumpy. I knew he would shiver when he heard of Mr. Ferdinand Pratt Jones. As if Violet would ever marry *him*, a likely matter!"

It was not a likely matter, as her young brother foresaw. Nevertheless, the fact that such a thing was possible, was afloat in Chelstone; and it was Ambrose's fate to hear it mentioned by the Mercers and Mr. and Mrs. Evans, that evening.

"His father is worth a million and a half of money, if he is worth a penny," Mr. Evans said; "and that's a splendid place he is building, two or three miles out of Hurstminster. Mr. Douglas has certainly been fortunate in his daughters, though unlucky with his son." Then Mr. Evans branched forth into many details of Willie's delinquencies, and said, what is commonly said in these cases, and, too commonly, alas, it is true, that over-indulgence in boyhood had brought all this sorrow upon Willie's father and mother. "I don't say this will affect the interests of the Bank, mind," said Mr. Evans in conclusion; "but I do say, I wonder Mr. Douglas did not hush up the matter, and let you re-enter the Bank, with no note or comment; but it is like him; he is as stern as—who was it? Junius, or Cassius—well, I have forgotten my Roman history long ago; but you know who I mean,—that man who had his sons flogged, and then hung, for something they had done wrong."

Mr. Evans's ideas were clear enough about pounds,

shillings, and pence, and the value of security, and shares ; but in matters of history they were decidedly very vague. Nevertheless, on the whole, he was right. Mr. Douglas was not the man to spare himself, and Brutus could not have been sterner and more determined in his air and bearing, than was Willie's father, when, at three o'clock the next day, he entered the partners' room at the Bank, and met there Mr. Sanderson, Evelyn Watson, and all the people, directly or indirectly connected with the transaction which had bowed him to the earth with sorrow.

Those who heard the father declare his son's guilt, and express his deep sorrow that the suspicion of fraud should have fallen on Ambrose Hampden, will never forget the impression it left. There was no attempt made to palliate the sin, and no effort to work unduly on the sympathies of 'his listeners. Nevertheless, the simple statement of the truth moved his hearers more than many words would have done.

Mrs. Day rocked herself to and fro, and wept ; while Mr. Evans had to wipe his spectacles several times—the tears would dim them so persistently. Mr. Douglas concluded by saying that his son was too ill to be removed from his bed, and that his ultimate recovery was doubtful. He asked them for their pity, and for their prayers for his unhappy boy ; and he wished publicly to call their attention to the noble and disinterested conduct of Mr. Hampden, who had borne silently what few men could have borne,

and had acted throughout, from the moment he had entered that office to the present time, like a Christian and a gentleman.

When Mr. Douglas stopped, old Mr. Sanderson rose to say a few words, which he did in a faltering, tremulous voice, to the effect, that he was sure all that were present would agree that Mr. Douglas had made every reparation in his power, and that every one must feel the deepest sympathy with him, and the profoundest respect also.


There were murmurs of assent; and then Mr. Evans opened the door, and held it for those who had been present to pass out.

Mrs. Day was the last to leave the room. Suddenly she turned back, and, going up to Mr. Douglas, who sat with his head bowed upon his hand—having lost the firm decision which he had called to his aid for the occasion—the good woman said—

“Sir, sir, don’t take this to heart so much. This is what I say, a son that got such a father must come to good at last. Now, sir, do ’ee take comfort. If we thought much of you before, we think double of you now. And both Humphrey and I say, May God bless ’ee; and so do many others in Chelstone, depend upon it. God bless ’ee, sir, and comfort ’ee, too; for I’m a mother, and know it must be a sore trial.”

Mr. Douglas extended his hand in token of gratitude to the poor woman; and, drawing off her loose glove, Mrs. Day took it for a moment in both hers,

† then trudged away.



Evelyn Watson had been the only person who had watched this scene unmoved. Ambrose thought he had never seen a cleverer nor a more cynical face. The thin lips were firmly compressed, and a sort of bitter, disappointed smile hovered round them. Ill health had driven him home from New Zealand. Thus cast adrift, and the purpose of his life marred, as we have seen, he was not unwilling to accept his uncle's renewed offer, that he should take the place of a son at Redlands, and a junior partner in the Chelstone Bank.

Ambrose Hampden's opinion of Evelyn Watson would have been a very different one if he had known him in those far off days, when he had woven the holly wreaths at Redlands, and wandered through the copses and over the fields and hills with a fair-haired girl, who made his world, and to all appearance he had seemed to make hers! But his faith in the beautiful and true had received a shock since then, and time alone could restore to him what he had lost—time only, and patience—and perhaps the love of one who, being true of heart, would be for him therefore beautiful, though outwardly far inferior to "our lady of Hurst Hill," as Consie was familiarly called in the family.

The two sisters were together in the drawing-room at Hurst Hill on that afternoon when their father braced himself to make a declaration of his son's misdeeds. Constance looked very much as she had done three years before—one with whom life ran smoothly; or, perhaps I would say, rather one who did

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JUN 18 1928

with his mother, dressed in the most approved infant toilette, lest any guests should come in for afternoon tea.

When little Douglas was no trouble, his mother liked to have him with her, and she would even take some pains to make him show off his baby accomplishments to excite admiration ; but if he was clamorous for anything which he might not have—if he pulled his mother's ear-rings or numerous ornaments too roughly—he was quietly dismissed to the nursery, where Constance said babies were in their natural climate.

Violet and Charlie had been guests at Hurst Hill during the last fortnight, and the baby had given an entire allegiance to his young aunt.

"He likes you far better than he does me," Constance said, calmly, as little Douglas held out his arms to Violet.

Violet took him ; but, looking at her watch, as she drew it out for the baby to play with, she said, "I must go home now. I think papa will have returned from the Bank, and will want me."

"Very well," said Constance, "and make papa come back to dinner ; no one will be with us, unless Freddie brings Mr. Pratt home with him to dine and sleep, I heard him say something about it."

The colour came to Violet's face. I think she said, "Papa would not like to meet any one at dinner just now ; so I will dine at home, and sleep there to-night."

"No ; I can't spare you, Violet, you must come

back, and I am sure papa will not mind meeting Ferdinand Jones. What a pity he possesses such a horrid name !”

Violet tossed the baby to and fro, and tripped up and down the room with him in her arms for a few minutes more ; then she spoke with the decision which, gentle as she was, never forsook her when the need arose. “ I shall not come back to-night, Constance ; I think papa will like a quiet evening with me. So I will say good-bye till to-morrow, baby darling. Will you have him, Constance ? ”

“ Take care,” said Constance, as Violet put the baby on his mother’s knee ; and the busy little hands were immediately plunged into a basket on the work-table, where Constance’s embroidery materials were kept. “ Take care, Violet ; now he has upset the basket, little torment ! Please ring for Medway, I shall send him to the nursery.”

Violet stooped to pick up the scattered treasures, and then saying, “ I will carry baby to the nursery ; ” she took him from his mother again, and said, “ good-bye, till to-morrow.”

The sisters kissed each other, and then Constance said, “ You remember our conversation the other day, Violet : since then I have good reason to know that Mr. Pratt Jones is going to see papa again, on a certain subject ; you will surely not allow such a very desirable thing to slip through your fingers. It is not as if he were a vulgar rich man ; but he is so unexceptionable in his manner, and so well informed, and will take a decidedly good position in the county. I hope,

Violet, for all our sakes, you will marry Mr. Jones, when he asks you."

"Most certainly I shall do no such thing," was Violet's answer ; "but I cling to the hope that he will never put me again to the disagreeable necessity of telling him so." And then she was gone.

In another hour, Violet was in her father's study, her arms round his neck, murmuring loving words in his ear. "Come into the garden, papa," she said, trying to rouse him from his dejection. "We can talk as well there, and it is such a lovely evening. I am going to dine here with you ; I knew you would not like to go up to Hurst Hill, as our lady commanded."

"No ; oh no," said Mr. Douglas, shrinking from the very idea ; "but I will take a turn with you, darling. Thank God we have you left to us to be ever a comfort ; and your mother says, Lucy is very kind and helpful to her. We will start for Paris on Monday, and I think I shall take Charlie ; he can return with Ellis, perhaps ; and it will be a treat for him to see Paris, poor boy ; a treat which he deserves, he is doing so well in everything. Now, dear child, I can say what I have to say to you better in the garden ; but where is my stick?" he said hurriedly ; and Violet thought how much he was altered, as he began to look about for his stick, which was all the time lying on the table before him.

Violet and her father passed out of the flower garden into the shrubbery ; where all the spring flowers lay, like a carpet woven with softest moss ; the western sunshine slanting through the branches,

and making golden streaks across the path. Mr. Douglas did not speak for some time

At last Violet said, "Papa, did you get through pretty well at the Bank to-day ; how many people were there ?"

"Everyone whom I requested to come ; the people were very kind—very kind—and I feel as if a load were taken off my mind, now I have publicly declared that noble fellow's innocence. For he is noble and true, Violet. God forbid that I should fail to acknowledge such chivalrous honour as his. But—" for Violet's grasp on her father's arm tightened—"I cannot say to him the word he craves to hear—I cannot give you to him, my child. It is not that I do not think well of Ambrose Hampden ; and it ill becomes me to cavil at the want of money and position now. I who have fallen so low—so low—as to be obliged to look in the face of my old partner in the Bank, and say my son has been guilty of fraud."

Violet stopped, and turned towards her father as he stood still for a moment ; she put both her arms round him, and looking up into his face said, "Father, take comfort. God will make even this work out for our good."

"Will he indeed, Violet," he almost groaned : then he added, "but, it is of you now I want to speak. A year ago Ambrose Hampden told me of his love for you ; and yesterday he repeated what he had then said, that it was changeless. Tell me, Violet, how is it with you ? will this decision of mine affect you ? will it go to your heart ?"

"Papa, a year ago, I *thought* I loved Ambrose ; now, I am *sure* of it ; but, papa, I will do as you wish : I will do as you wish. Only I cannot marry any one else. I *will* not marry any one else. I have heard a great deal from Constance, lately, about a person liking me, whom I never, never could like, if this had not been as it is. Please, papa, will you protect me, if Constance and mamma should wish me to marry Mr. Jones ; although he has never said again that he wanted to marry me."

"Yes, he *has*, my darling, he has : he came here this morning, before I went to Chelstone, and he is willing to lay everything at your feet. He behaved well, I must say ; for I told him how things stood with us, and hid nothing from him ; and I promised to hear what you had to say, and let him know the result."

"Then please say, papa, that I could never marry him ; but that I thank him for doing me what he considers, at least, an honour ; there are so many other people who, I am sure, will suit him *so much* better," she added, with a smile, and so simply, that her father smiled too.

"He does not seem to think so, Violet ; but I would never urge upon one of my daughters to link her lot in life with a man whom she could not love. I will tell Mr. Pratt Jones what you say ; and, as to the rest, I propose that, for another two years, the matter should be held in abeyance. I don't ask you or Ambrose Hampden to have no communication with each other, it is needless ; you are both too

straightforward. In two years' time you will be of age, Violet, and that might make some difference: at present, I am justified in withholding my consent to any engagement. Do you understand me, my child?"

"Yes, papa," she said, softly. "I should like to have seen him, that he might know I was not changed; but if you think it better not, I will be content—I mean," she corrected, "I will submit."

He pressed her to his heart, and bade God bless her; and then they retraced their steps to the house. Mr. Douglas went to the room upstairs, and Violet to the study, where she had left one of her gloves. When she opened the door, she saw Ambrose standing in the same place where she had seen him twelvemonths before. He advanced to her as she paused, half uncertain whether to stay or not, and looking into her face, said—

"Ellis told me to wait here for your father. I am come to know my fate." Then he added: "I did not betray your trust in me, Violet." Still she did not speak.

The rumours afloat in Chelstone which had vexed his ear, now came surging up in Ambrose's mind. He must set his doubts at rest.

"Are you glad to see me?" he asked. "If it is otherwise; *if* it is," he repeated, with a sound almost of terror in his voice, "I do not know how I shall bear it. I have borne much, and endured much; but this would crush me. I must give up everything, then." For her head was bent, and her face turned

away from him. "Do not keep me in suspense," he said, earnestly.

Her eyes were full of tears, as at last she looked up at him. But there was the same sweet, loving, trusting expression in their soft depths,—the same which he had carried about with him all through the year that was gone: the same that had shone from Violet's eyes on him, as he turned from little Cyril, lying calm and still in the sleep of death. Had she spoken no word, he had almost been content; but she did speak at last.

"I have believed in you," she said, "and trusted you; will you not trust in me, and believe in me, though my father says he cannot give me to you now. I must not do anything against his will, nor add one drop to his full cup, by resisting it. For oh! you cannot tell what grief it is to hear that my brother should have brought this disgrace on us. You cannot tell what a grief it is to me, to us all."

"I can tell," he answered; "for I know what Mabel and my mother suffered."

"But that was very different," she said, earnestly. "Every one must have felt you were true—every one who ever knew you, I mean."

It was very sweet to hear such words from her, and to see her face kindle as she spoke them.

"Then, I may carry hope away with me," he said, "if nothing more. I can live on that for a time, at least, while I strive, and work, and labour to be more worthy of you."

"Yes," she answered; "whether it be two, or

three or double the number of years, I cannot change."

"May God bless you for such words," he said. "Now I will go back to London, and work and wait." Then he added, solemnly: "We have a strong tie, Violet, which no earthly hand can sever—the same faith, the same hope; the same Hand to guide, and the same end in view: is it not so?"

"Yes," she replied, in a low, reverent tone. "One Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father: we need not be afraid."

He took her hands in both his, and bending over them, kissed them gently: then, saying, "Will you tell your father I will write to him," he left her.

So these two brave young hearts parted. Was not such victory over self, such earnest and faithful following the line of duty, worthy of all praise? Violet waited, for a few minutes, where Ambrose had left her; then she went to the door of her father's dressing-room, and knocked. He was lying on the sofa, utterly worn out and exhausted.

"Father," she said, kneeling down by his side, "I went into the study, and found Ambrose there"—unconsciously she called him by his Christian name—"I told him what I told you, that I would never do anything contrary to your will. He is gone now; he is going back to London, and will write to you."

"He must not go back to London," Mr. Douglas said, springing up from the sofa with sudden energy. "He must come here: we are going to leave Chel-

stone for some months ; there is no reason why he should go."

"I think he would rather go, papa. Mabel is getting on well with Mrs. Evans, and his mother is more cheerful than she would be here ; wait till you hear from him, before you say anything more. Now, papa, I am going to get ready for dinner ; do come down."

"I cannot, Violet," he said, falling back again on the sofa. "It is a mockery to attempt it."

"Yes, papa," she said, in her own gentle decided way : "you must come ; you must have your dinner. Ellis will ring the bell directly, and I must go and dress." She went, and returned soon, in a simple white muslin : then, putting her hand within his, she said, "Charlie is waiting ; come, papa."

He could not resist her, and by her efforts, the dinner passed off pleasantly.

"Charlie," Violet said to her young brother afterwards ; "will you take me to Grannie, and leave me there for an hour ? I will come back in time to make papa's tea."

"All right," was the reply. "I think, Violet, you are the most plucky girl I ever knew. What should we do without you ? I say, I think it will be rather nice our having to go to Paris together. We shall see all the pictures in the Louvre, your favourite Murillo amongst them."

Violet would not damp her young brother's enthusiasm ; but she looked forward with fear to meeting Willie, and thought Charlie did not realize how ill

he had been, and how much trial intercourse with him must needs bring with it henceforth.

Violet had kept up through the trying suspense of the last two weeks wonderfully ; indeed, Charlie's boyish admiration might well be excited. But, seated in her particular chair, by Grannie's side this evening, the long pent-up tears found vent at last ; and Grannie soothed and comforted her more by the unspoken tokens of hearty sympathy than by many words.

The family sorrow which Willie had brought upon them was fully shared by Mrs. Douglas. She could enter into her son Kenneth's keen sense of the disgrace with which Willie had clouded his name. For was not that name her husband's, too ? and could she not look back over long years, and remember how it had ever been one honoured and beloved in Chelstone ?

But Grannie could take comfort from the thought that her son would be brought nearer to his God by this trial touching him, as it did, in his tenderest part.

And with regard to Violet, though her young head was bowed with sorrow, as with faltering lips she told of all it must cost her to acquiesce in her father's decision, how could Grannie do anything but rejoice for her ? how could her faith fail, that one who had so stedfastly set herself to put into practice the allegiance she professed to her Lord, who had determined to render obedience to an earthly father in the spirit as well as in the letter—how could Grannie's faith fail, that that gentle

girl, so firm where firmness was needed, so strong where many would have yielded, would find her reward, and reap a golden harvest at last?

The love of a man such as Ambrose had proved himself to be, must also needs bring with it a blessing; and Grannie was not afraid for Violet, though she felt for her, and with her, as few others could have done.

CHAPTER XV.

LIGHT AT EVENING TIME.

"Ye stars, that round the Sun of Righteousness
In glorious order roll ;
With harps for ever strung, ready to bless
God for each rescued soul :
Ye eagle spirits, that build in light Divine,
Oh ! think of us to-day ;
Faint warblers of this earth, that would combine
Our trembling notes with your accepted lay."
KEBLE.

THERE are many beautiful places in England, many lovely nooks and corners which escape the eye of the traveller, who rushes from one county to another in the soft-cushioned railway carriage, and sees only the stronger features of the landscape, with that cursory glance which is one of the characteristics of the age in which we live. We see many places, people, and things, where our forefathers saw few. We speak of extended spheres and increased observation, but it is a question if we may not lose in depth what we gain in width, and if we may not miss the power of seeing a little thoroughly in the effort we make to see a great deal imperfectly.

There is no spot perhaps which repays that sort of intimate knowledge and loving appreciation more than the little island at the foot of Hampshire, smiling its welcome to us as we cross the narrow strip of water, which separates it from the mainland. The very name of the island was, fifty years ago, as full of the promise of recovery and lengthened life to many a poor weary invalid, as San Remo, Mentone, and Cannes are at the present day.

The Undercliff was to their fancy the region of perpetual summer, where myrtles and roses bloomed at Christmas, and where the icy hand of frost and snow was unknown. Delusive was that hope, it might be, then, as the same hope often is now, about the places further south which I have mentioned.

Still, the Isle of Wight has its own peculiar charm, which is not known by those who hurry through it, or spend a few days at one of the larger towns, but is discovered by others who live in it and learn to love it, and grow familiar with its hidden beauties. Not the least of these last is the landslip lying between Bonchurch Old Church, and Luccombe Chine. Here large masses of rock lie heaped together in wildest confusion—here, hanging from their ledges, fantastic wreaths of ivy, and plumes of fern wave in the breeze—here, overshadowed by the soft-browed range of downs, and protected by them from the cold blasts which sweep over the other side of the island, there is a wonderful amount of warmth and sunshine, even in December.

For many weeks, a chair, drawn by a Shetland pony, had come down from one of the pretty villas nestling under the hills to the churchyard gate, where the quaint little church stands to keep guard over the dead of centuries ago, and where the author of the "Old Man's Home" lies in his last, long sleep.

The rippling of the sea below was making sweet music one September afternoon, and the birds in the wood and copses, which stretch down to the very edge of the cliff, answered the chime of the waves.

On the step of the chair Violet Douglas sat looking out upon the sea with a dreamy, thoughtful glance, and the eyes of the poor invalid in the chair were also fixed upon the expanse before him. He had made sad shipwreck on the sea of life—a short life, too; and now the end was drawing near.

For many months, a gloomy melancholy had settled over Willie Douglas. There was no response to his mother's loving words; no sign of gratitude for his father's forbearance and forgiveness; no enjoyment of Lucy's sparkling repartee, which nothing had power to quell. But, though he showed little of what he really felt, he always liked to have Violet with him. He was uneasy and excitable when she was absent, and would listen to her, as she read untiringly to him for hours together in her low, sweet voice. But Violet, though she felt that here was the work God had given her to do, and never failed in gentleness and patience with her brother, did long sometimes that he would give some token of what was passing within him. Would it never come?

Poor little Trove was asleep on the rug over Willie's knees this afternoon, and he stroked his short stubby coat with his thin fingers, but his thoughts were far away.

"Violet," he said, at last, "is my father coming soon?"

"Yes, dear; I think so—on Thursday; and then mamma will return to Chelstone with him for a little time."

"I think she had better stay now, Violet," he said. "I shall not come out in the chair many times more. I want to speak to you, Violet," he continued. "I know another of those hemorrhages will be the last; and while I have time there is something I wish to do. I want to see Ambrose Hampden. Will you write to my father and tell him so? That not a day may be lost, write to-night," he added, earnestly; "to-night, mind." Violet turned towards her brother, and, taking his hand in hers, kissed it lovingly. "I wonder you don't all hate me," said Willie; "especially *you*, Violet. Do you think Hampden can forgive me?"

"He *has* forgiven you long ago, darling," Violet answered.

"If it were all to come over again, Violet, I think I should be very different. But God knows best, and so I am not to be tried. Our poor mother thinks differently: there is no love like a mother's." He put his hand over his eyes, and Violet, dreading excitement for him, made no rejoinder, hoping he would say no more. But the ice was broken, and he went on: "I should like you to tell our mother one day, that

when I first came here I could not pray. It was not very wonderful, seeing I had not even said a prayer for so many years. But last Sunday evening, when you were all at church, there came a vision of old times before me, and I thought I was a child, in the nursery at home, saying my prayers to mamma, while Patty was putting Lucy to bed. I saw myself, quite distinctly, kneeling there, and the old words came back : I said them over and over. Violet, it was the beginning of better things. I believe He heard me ; I believe His pardon and His love are enough even for me. But, oh, Violet ! I shiver when I see that great black gulf lying between the child in white and the man who is lying here, a miserable wreck. Tell mamma what I say. I cannot bear to see her grief ; and when I tried to say something yesterday, it was too much for her."

Poor Violet's eyes overflowed in spite of every effort ; but she promised as her brother desired ; and then she began to repeat to him that beautiful old hymn of Cowper's, which seemed to her so appropriate, and for which he often asked.

"The billows swell, the winds are high,
Clouds overcast my watery sky ;
Out of the depths to Thee I call,
My fears are great, my strength is small.

"O Lord, the pilot's part perform,
And guide and guard me through the storm ;
Defend me from each threatening ill,
Control the waves, say, ' Peace, be still ! '

" Amid the roaring of the sea,
My soul still hangs her hope on Thee ;
Thy faithful love, Thy constant care,
Are all that save me from despair.

" Dangers of every shape and name
Attend the followers of the Lamb ;
Who leave this world's deceitful shore,
And leave it to return no more.

" Though tempest-tossed, and half a wreck,
My Saviour through the floods I seek ;
Let no rough winds, or stormy main,
Drive back my shattered bark again."

Willie listened with earnest attention, repeating the words "shattered bark" several times. Then Mrs. Douglas and Patty were seen approaching. Patty brought with her another wrap, as she thought the wind was getting rather cold. Then, leaving Willie under his mother's care, Violet went home to do his bidding, and write to her father.

The Feast of Saint Michael and All Angels dawned bright and clear. It was quite like another summer-tide, and Willie was out almost the whole of the day in his chair. He seemed better, and was evidently bracing himself for the coming interview with Ambrose, who was to accompany Mr. Douglas to Bonchurch that evening. To Violet's surprise Willie said he felt well enough to go to the afternoon service in the church, and she, and Patty, and his mother went with him.

The coach from Ryde was just passing the door of the church as Willie's chair stopped before it. In

another moment the horses were drawn up quickly, and Mr. Douglas and Ambrose got off the roof of the coach. Willie's face grew pale, and he fixed his large clear eyes on Ambrose's face. It needed no words—that beseeching glance pleaded so plainly for forgiveness. The shock of seeing one whom he remembered in his gay reckless youth so prostrate, smote Ambrose with a sudden sense of pity, and the pause he made when Willie held out his hand to him, was caused by very different feelings to those, which at first the poor invalid attributed to him. He withdrew his hand, and, turning to his father, murmured, “I cannot wonder——”

But in another moment Ambrose was himself again. He advanced to the chair, and, saying, “Let me help you,” he drew Willie's hand within his arm; and so they went up to the church together, the rest following. As they stood at the porch, Willie took off his hat and paused.

“Forgive me, Hampden, and pray for me.”

And Ambrose answered, with a fervent pressure of the hand resting on his arm, “I will.”

That was a solemn service, and one which those who joined it will never forget. For it seemed to some hearts then present as if the voice of Jesus was heard in the midst,—“I say unto you, there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner that repenteth.”

Ambrose and William Douglas were alone for some time that evening. No one ever knew what passed between them. But Mrs. Douglas met Ambrose as

he came out of the room, and saw that there were traces of deep emotion on his face. He passed her without a word, and went out to tell his thankfulness to God for all He had done for him, under the star-lit sky, beneath which the sea was sleeping, and murmuring in its sleep as it washed the base of the cliff on which stood the little church, just as it stood long centuries ago.

It must needs be that our earthly joy should ever be touched with sadness ; that there is no melody in our mortal life but has some minor in the strain. Thus it was with Violet and Ambrose, when the next morning they were given to each other, and Violet's father had blessed them as his children. They knew that the shadow of death was hovering near, and they could not think of all the sad details of that life—whose story was so nearly told—without pain. It might have been so different ; and grievous it is to look back on days and years of sin, and remember how great might have been the good instead of the evil—the gladness instead of the pain—the happiness instead of the misery—which might have marked a wasted life, and have left behind a fragrant memory, when the day was spent and the night had drawn near. But here there was comfort which is not always granted—for none could doubt that Willie's repentance was sincere, and none could doubt but that now, at evening-time, the light of the Sun of Righteousness had shone upon the darkened soul, and Jesus had said, "I am thy salvation."

It was, nevertheless, a morning ever to be marked

by a red letter in the calendar of their lives, which Ambrose and Violet spent together amongst the natural beauties of that landslip which I have described.

They had borne separation bravely, because the line of Duty pointed it as the *straight* and only way for them ; but not the less sweet was the union, which now was as the line of Beauty following them with its curves, and rewarding them for the self-control and self-denial each had exercised. So true it is that if Hope is deferred, and patience needed to bear us on our road, and brave exertion made to learn the great lessons of life, leaving the reason of why they are set before us with God,—when the desire is granted it is as the tree of life.

And when we grasp what we will have, and follow our own way perversely and determinedly, how often—oh, how often!—the fruit, when we receive it, is changed into ashes ; and we wake to find we have chased but a shadow !

Mr. and Mrs. Douglas, standing together in the verandah of the pretty villa, which has become very home-like to them, watch Ambrose and Violet coming slowly along the road towards them with lingering feet, unwilling, as it were, to end this, the first sweet chapter of their intercourse. No wonder that Mrs. Douglas says, as the two come nearer, and Violet looks up with a bright smile, and waves her hand to them,—

“Dear child, how glad she looks ; she deserves to be happy.”

And her husband rejoins, "Yes, and he is worthy of her, Mary. He has fairly won from us the greatest treasure we have to bestow. May God bless them!"

So, with her father's benediction resting upon her, we will leave Violet. Life, and life's problems, still lie before her, nor will the future be unclouded, or the way always plain; but she has a strong arm to lean upon, and a noble heart to rest in. Why should we fear that she will be blessed, and be made a blessing to those around her!

From the moment that Ambrose had been publicly vindicated from every shadow of doubt and suspicion, Mabel had recovered all her old brightness and energy, and was once more the gladdening influence of her home.

Ambrose went back to Chelstone, at Mr. Douglas's entreaty; and Mrs. Hampden and his sisters once more found a home, if not beneath the shadow, still within sight of the old Abbey tower.

Mr. Douglas rented a house for them, not far from his mother's; and here Mabel taught her sisters, and ministered to her mother with untiring zeal. She could bear everything now, now that Ambrose had succeeded in establishing his position; now that she saw him at last crowned with success. What was it to Mabel, that our lady of Hurst Hill acknowledged her with a distant bow; that she was excluded, by the rigid code of Chelstone legislation, from some of its social gatherings; what was all this to Mabel, while Ambrose was honoured and respected; and his name

as an author began to be known, beyond the small circle of the place where he faithfully fulfilled his duties at the Bank.

From the moment that Evelyn Watson heard Ambrose's story, he turned towards him with kindness and friendship ; and there are some, who looking into the future think that in Mabel's stedfast character, and integrity of thought and action, Evelyn Watson has to learn that the creed of his earlier life yet holds good, and that he may still find, that the beautiful *can* be both good and *true*. It is a happiness to many to know that the deep pain inflicted upon him by our lady at Hurst Hill, was to find a remedy, and the bitter memory of the past was to be effaced by the sweet promise of the future.

Once more the Christmas chimes ring out from the old Abbey tower, over Cyril's little grave ; and bring back to his father's and mother's heart, many memories of Willie Douglas lying in the parish churchyard of Bonchurch, far away from his kindred. Once more they ring out the old year, and ring in the new year ; and with the sound yet ringing in our ears, we will bid old Chelstone farewell.

Every day and every hour—there appear—in the lives of most of us, mysteries which we cannot fathom, problems that we cannot solve. Let us trust where we do not understand ; let us not look backward too much to our losses, and question why we were so bereft ; nor earthward to our crosses, and ask why we are so tried ; but rather onward to the future, which is in God's hands ; onward and upwards

to the blessed time, when those that are faithful, and endure unto the end, shall be saved from all perplexity and death for evermore : shall see no longer through a glass darkly ; but in the sunshine of God's presence shall see face to face, shall know as they are known.

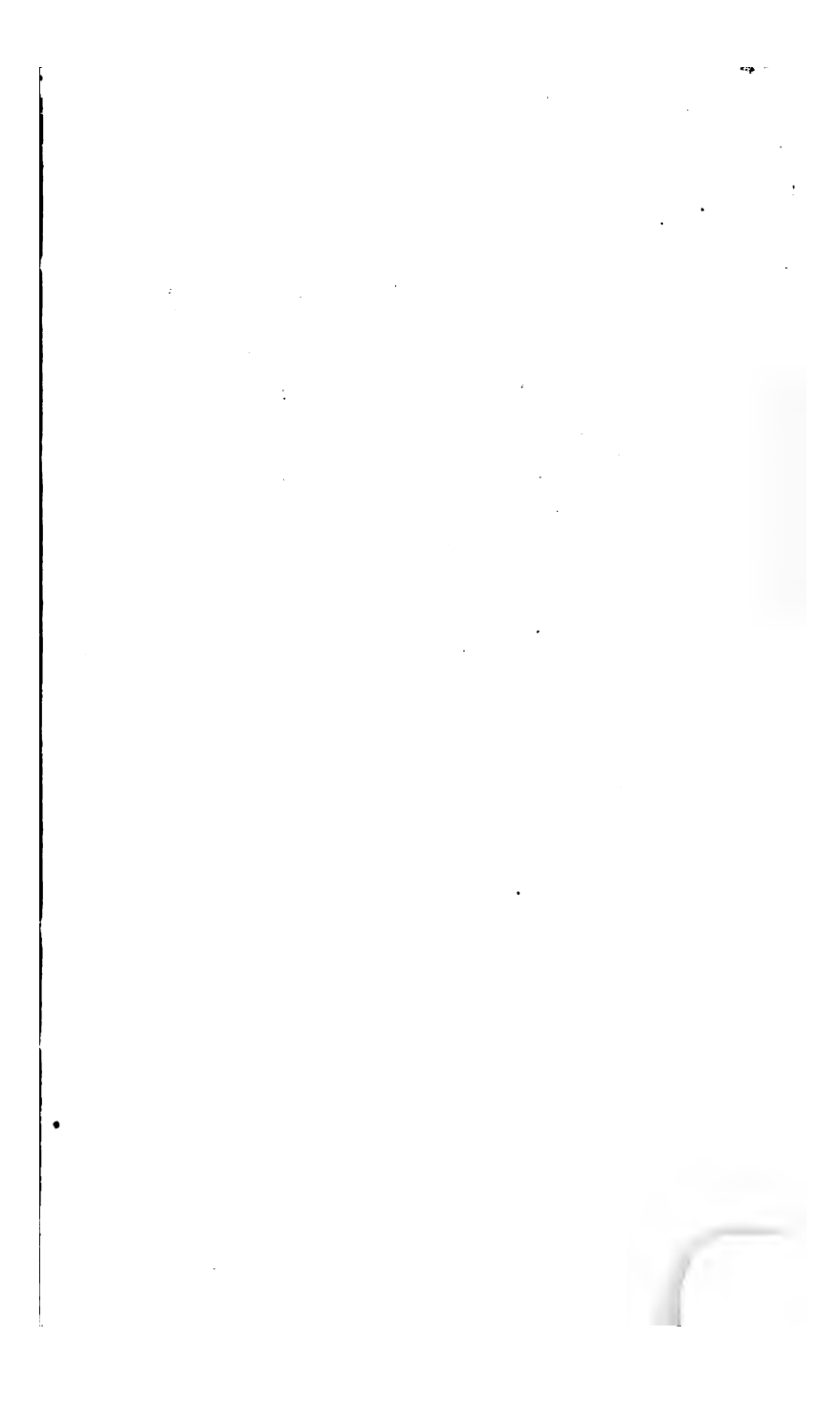
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